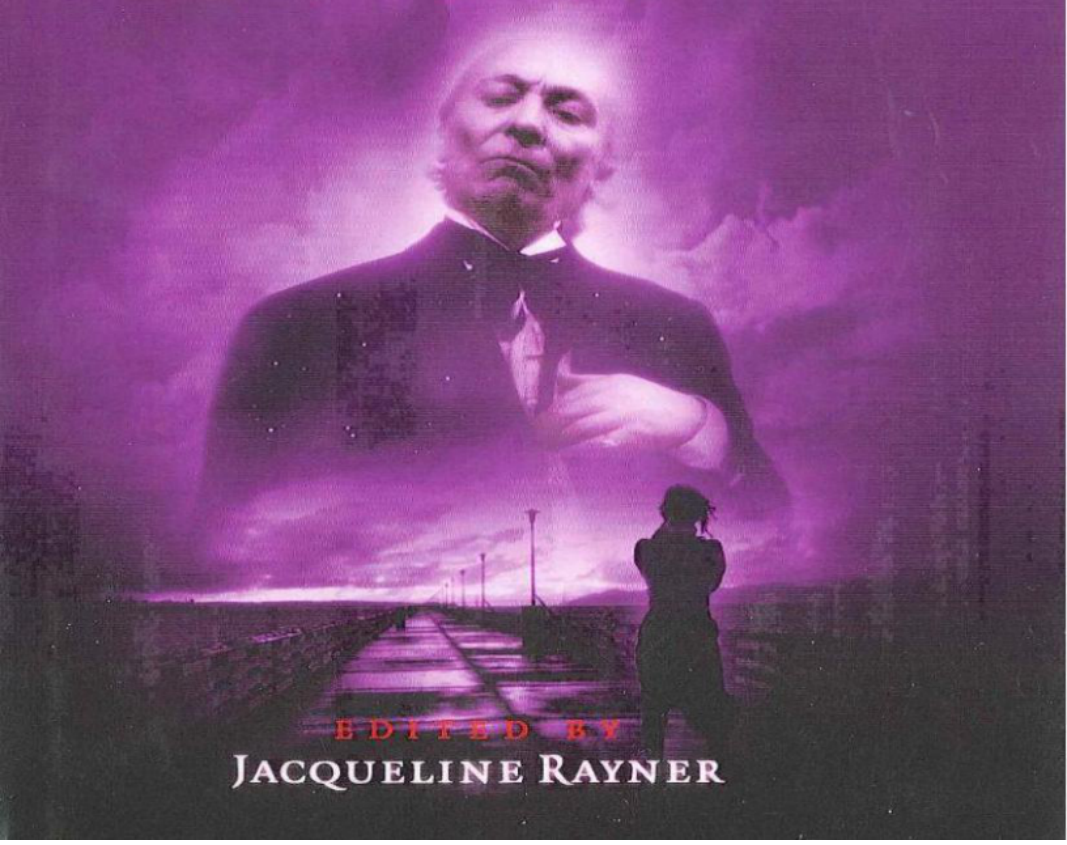
BIG FINISH

DOCTOR WHO

SHORT TRIPS: FAREWELLS

A SHORT-STORY ANTHOLOGY



EDITED BY

JACQUELINE RAYNER

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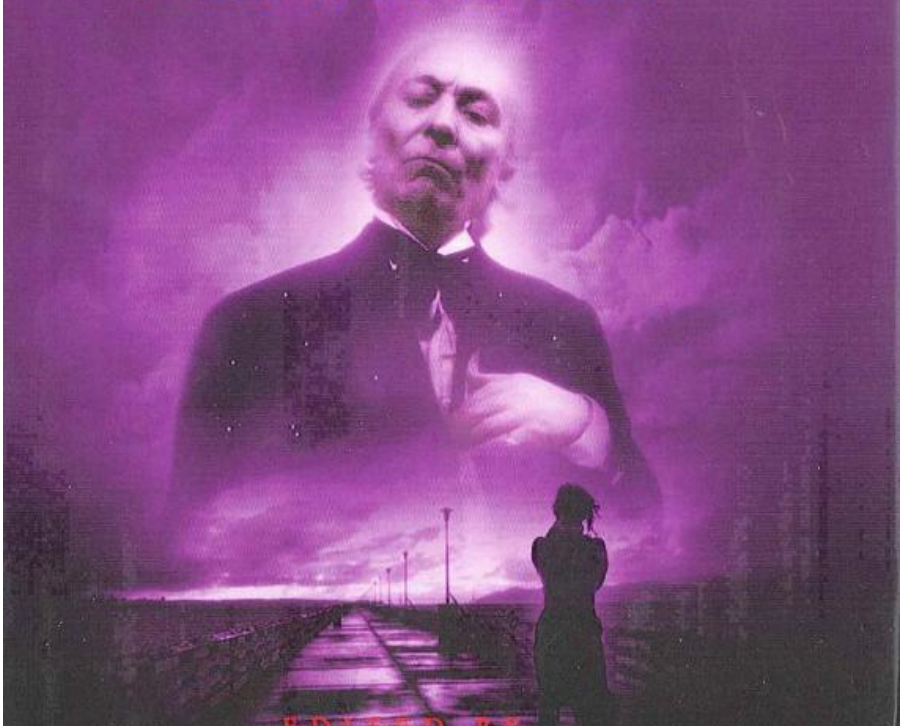

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SHORT TRIPS:

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A Short-Story Anthology

Edited by Jacqueline Rayner

BIG

FINISH

Published by Big Finish Productions Ltd

PO Box 1127

Maidenhead

SL6 3LW

www.bigfinish.com

Range Editor: Ian Farrington

Managing Editor: Jason Haigh-Ellery

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ISBN 1-84435-151-3

Cover art by Stuart Manning 2006

Original sleeve design by Clayton Hickman

First published March 2006

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Printed and bound in Great Britain by Biddles Ltd

www.biddles.co.uk

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The Mother Road

Gareth Wigmore

An Adventure of the First Doctor,

with Susan, Ian Chesterton and Barbara Wright

ILLINOIS

The forecourt of a Chicago hotel, downtown, the Sears Tower and the rest of

the familiar skyline hanging in the heat like a row of knives above the oven in a

plush kitchen. An old man seemed to be talking to himself as he stood near a

couple of parked cars. Anyone driving past who happened to see him would

have thought that there'd been a breakout at a well-to-do insane asylum; he was

dressed wildly inappropriately for the heat wave, wearing thick check trousers

and a three-quarter-length black coat, complete with waistcoat, wing-collar shirt

and necktie. What was more, he was holding up a large black umbrella, which

would certainly fend off any imaginary rain.

The Doctor was rather pleased with his parasol, which was keeping him in

the shade. And although the heat was boiling up from the tarmac too, his long

white hair and hawkish face were free of sweat. 'It's all quite a

misunderstanding,' he was saying to thin air that had gone thick and muggy. 'I

didn't think — how was I supposed to know what he was talking about? The

man barely spoke English!' There was a pause, in which the Doctor glared about

himself angrily, his lips pursed in frustration. 'Oh, Chesterton, aren't you ever

going to be finished? We've got work to do!'

After a moment or two, a man's voice, slightly muffled, replied, 'You know,

Doctor, it isn't as though this is the first time this has happened...'

'Chesterton, if I thought any harm could come to the TARDIS, I wouldn't be

so free and easy about it. It can't be destroyed or damaged, and it can't go

anywhere. No one can even get into it but me, with this key and this key alone.'

The Doctor patted his breast pocket twice with his free hand. His eyes widened

in horror — no key there — and he dropped his umbrella to one side as he felt

around in his coat and trouser pockets until he found the reassuring, familiar

shape. 'Yes, with this key and this key alone,' he repeated, brandishing it and

giving a characteristic hooting chuckle of satisfaction before stashing it away

again.

He leant down to pick up the umbrella but changed his mind and, still

bending double, wandered forward towards one of the parked cars, a rather

beautiful, if slightly battered, Oldsmobile 88 painted a fetching shade of purple.

It was a classic American car of the 1960s — an enormous hood, two doors, a soft

black top and curved lines, the chrome of its hubcaps and trim gleaming. ‘I’ll

admit that the sooner we’re in pursuit of the TARDIS, the happier I’ll be, my boy.

Aren’t you even nearly finished, hmm?’ Then the Doctor was all but knocked off

his feet as Ian Chesterton slipped out from under the Oldsmobile on a wheeled

maintenance board, his face blackened with grease and damp with sweat.

‘Ah!’ said the Doctor, clapping his hands. ‘All done?’

Ian instantly brought a hand in front of his eyes to shade it from the violent

sun, and then, thinking better of it, began wiping both hands on his borrowed

overalls as he rose to his feet. ‘Now that’s what I call a machine, Doctor, one to

love and cherish. Someone’s cared for that car — the same way you ought to care

for the TARDIS.’ He was tall, dark and handsome in an unthreatening sort of

way, with short black hair and a side parting; he looked the sort of man you

knew would grit his teeth and get you out of a jam.

The Doctor bristled. ‘Chesterton, you don’t know the half of what I do to care

for my ship, but she does — the ship does. Between us, the TARDIS

and I might

not be the most precise of navigators, but I keep her in tip-top condition and I

won't hear it said otherwise...'

Ian shook his head and clapped a grimy hand on the Doctor's back. 'The

engine's, what, maybe five years ahead of what I'm used to, but I think it's fine.

We can get on the road whenever you like.'

The old man's face broke into a wide grin of delight. 'Excellent, Chesterton! I

knew she'd be a beauty. When I win at cards, I win big!'

'Except for the TARDIS,' Ian reminded him.

He dismissed that with a wave or two of his hand. 'Oh, we'll be back in the

TARDIS in next to no time, I'm sure of it. Now, you go and get the girls and I'll

settle the hotel bill. Well, what are you waiting for, hmm?'

Ian had shut his eyes in resignation. 'Doctor,' he said.

'What is it, my boy?'

'Before we begin to drive 2,500 miles in search of your most important

possession — which you've just lost in a bet, again — I am going to have a

shower. An extra half-hour can't hurt.'

The Doctor grabbed his coat lapel with one hand and patted Ian affectionately

on the chest with the other. 'Quite right, my boy, quite right. You go on.

California certainly is a long way away so, after all, you've got a lot of driving

ahead of you.'

Ian opened one eye. 'Oh, please, no. Please tell me you can drive, Doctor.

Please tell me Susan can drive.'

The Doctor looked blank. 'Well, I never did ask very much about what they

taught her at that school of yours, Chesterton. .'

MISSOURI

'Ah, St Louis,' Barbara Wright said, sitting in the front left seat of the

Oldsmobile as it passed a big white building with an enormous sign written on

its side, 'the perfect place for.. frozen custard?' She turned her head — a good

head, with features slightly too large and sad to be beautiful, crowned with

bobbed black hair straight out of a retro fashion catalogue — to the three slightly

bored faces in the car with her and said, 'I think we have to, don't we?' And she

turned the wheel through ninety degrees, taking the purple-coloured car off the

road and smoothly into the parking lot.

2

The trip down from Chicago had been fractious, to say the least, full of the

usual long-drive family arguments. Ian had been cross with Barbara

for having

had a couple of drinks at the hotel, which initially doomed him to be designated

driver, but he had of course really been cross with the Doctor and Susan for not

knowing something so basic as how to drive. He suspected that the Doctor in fact

knew perfectly well and was just being lazy; Ian confidently expected him to take

the wheel at any moment. But they'd made steady progress along what both the

teachers had been delighted to discover was Route 66, or the closest thing left of

it. 'This is the great American road trip we're on, Doctor, the one people always

talk about,' Barbara had said. 'Get your kicks on Route 66 — you must have

heard of it, surely. It's famous! We may as well enjoy the scenery rather than just

taking the motorway.'

'Interstate, Barbara, interstate,' Ian had chastened.

'What on earth are the two of you talking about?' Susan had leant forward to

them over the gear stick, all amused and curious.

'Shall we sing the song, Ian?'

'Well, I think we should, Barbara.'

And they had both begun, neither of them entirely certain of the words: 'If

you're planning to motor west/Take my highway, it's the best...'

The Doctor had kept quiet on that occasion. But the prospect of frozen

custard seemed too much for him. He began to burble from the back seat about

wasting valuable time, and banged his stick on the floor of the Oldsmobile so

hard he nearly put it through altogether. As he wasn't driving, he didn't have a

lot of choice in the matter. 'I don't want frozen custard!' he yelled when Barbara

pulled in. 'If I wanted custard frozen, I could freeze it perfectly well myself!'

'I think it sounds rather yummy,' Susan offered, incurring a glare from her

grandfather.

Once inside, the Doctor changed his tune, and while his friends were

gawping at the menu as though it were written in ancient Mesopotamian, he'd

already made up his mind. 'I'll have the triple chocolate pistachio sundae, with

some strawberries if you please, young lady,' he said to a waitress who probably

weighed as much as the four of them put together. 'And a skinny latte with a

shot of vanilla — no, no, let me see, a shot of hazelnut.'

'This isn't custard,' Barbara was saying, flipping the menu over and sounding

thoroughly disappointed. 'It's ice cream with all sorts of trimmings.'

'Welcome to the early days of the twenty-first century, Barbara,' the old man

declaimed, leaning on his stick and looking out from their booth to

survey the

whole restaurant. ‘Anything you want, you can have it — provided you can pay.

A time of epicurean excess, a time of simmering global strife, a time of

hamburgers the size of your head and thick shakes as big as your arm, of

imaginary medical complaints and stress-related lives, of panic and terror, of

genetic modification and salads with more calories than a chocolate bar. A good

time for the greedy, a bad time for the charitable, and this country more extreme

in both than anywhere else on your little world. In short, a nice place to visit.’ He

smiled at his friends, satisfied at his own eloquence, and allowed himself a quick

3

‘Hmm!’

‘Can I have a plain frozen custard, please?’ Ian said to the waitress, who

hadn’t gone away and was looking at the Doctor with a panicked expression

somewhere between ‘I love your sweet old man’ and ‘Don’t make eye contact

with the weirdo’.

The waitress’s pen hovered over her notepad. Then she shrugged and told

Ian, ‘We don’t really do plain here at the frozen custard house.’

Ian looked the menu up and down again, and drew a blank. ‘Well,

what's the

closest you've got to plain?'

The waitress thought for a moment. 'Fancy?'

Ian nodded. 'Just a fancy frozen custard, then, please.'

'And to drink?'

'I'll have a thick shake as big as my arm, please. As fancy as you like.'

KANSAS

Susan was dreaming. She and Ian were alone in a garden she'd known back

on her home planet, having a picnic. Then suddenly it was dusk, and they knew

that they had to get indoors before night fell — and that something was watching

them as they ran, something nervous but dangerous, something that would fight

her if it felt threatened by them. And then she felt its hand come down on her

shoulder and woke with a scream.

The Doctor jumped when he heard it and let the steering wheel wobble,

sending the Oldsmobile veering into the next lane. Fortunately, nothing was

coming and Ian, in the passenger seat beside him, grabbed the wheel and

brought the car back straight again. 'Whatever's the matter, child?' the Doctor

asked, slapping Ian's hands away.

'Sorry, Grandfather,' came the response.

‘I just woke her up too quickly, Doctor, that’s all,’ Barbara said, taking her

hand away from Susan’s shoulder. ‘I’m sorry, Susan, I just didn’t want you to

miss Kansas.’

‘Miss it?’ the teenager said, yawning and stretching out on the back seat next

to Barbara, looking into the blackness of the Kansas night. ‘It’s enormous, isn’t

it?’ Ian laughed. ‘That’s right, Susan, it is pretty enormous. I dread to think how

many times it could swallow England.’

‘But we only skirt it, you see,’ Barbara told her. ‘The old Route 66 just covers

13 miles of Kansas, the tiniest bit of it.’

Still yawning, Susan said, ‘What’s that in kilometres?’

‘Oh, about twenty, I suppose,’ Ian replied. ‘Hey, steady on, Doctor — we

want to have a look round the place, not just whiz past it all.’

The Doctor didn’t slow down, and didn’t turn round to humour Ian.

‘Chesterton, now that you’ve taught me the rudiments of driving this ridiculous

contraption, perhaps we’ll make progress a little quicker, eh? How tedious it is,

travelling from A to B by having to go through every point in between the two. I

may not always have an absolutely precise idea where the TARDIS is going, but

at least it gets there quickly.'

Ian winked at Barbara. 'We could always have got an aeroplane, Doctor,' he

said, not for the first time.

'What, passports and ID checks and biometric scans? I don't think so!' The

old man chortled, overtaking a truck — badly — and waving in a friendly

fashion at its enraged driver.

'I was having quite a nice sleep, and there's not really much to see out there,'

Susan said sulkily as the Oldsmobile skipped over a little pontoon bridge. 'Just

more of the same, really. Oh, we were going through Missouri for ever. This is a

stupid country, all flat and lifeless.' This sleepy petulance just added to the rather

gamine charm that Susan had — the tousled, boyish black hair, the wide brown

eyes and delicate features. She leaned forward, putting her hands round the

Doctor's shoulders as he drove them on through the night. 'Can't we stop

somewhere soon, Grandfather? It'd be nice to sleep in a bed tonight rather than

in the back of this rickety old thing.'

'Less of that, if you please,' Ian said, pretending to be offended. 'This car's

younger than I am. I think I'm holding up pretty well, considering I'm probably

in my seventies by now, wouldn't you say, Barbara?'

'Ian, that's a point.' Barbara's voice was excited. 'Imagine if we're out there

somewhere now, drawing our pensions and playing with our grandchildren.'

'Maybe we live in Kansas,' Ian said with a shrug.

'Maybe we do. Maybe London was too small for us after all the things we've

seen — all the things we're seeing now, the alien worlds, other ways of living.'

'Maybe you're not on Earth at all,' Susan said, giggling. 'Maybe by the time

you're seventy you'll still be in the TARDIS with me and Grandfather. You'll

look as old as him by then, and I'll have to look after all three of you.'

'Oh, do be quiet, Susan,' came the Doctor's voice, stung into irritation. 'I am

trying to drive, and the citizens of the United States of America come 2006 don't

seem to have a great deal of regard for manners on the road...' The glare of

headlights lit up his features, showing his eyes wide and bright, though tense.

'Perhaps you're right, child,' he continued after a moment, 'perhaps we should

find somewhere to sleep tonight. Even I'm becoming a little tetchy, cooped up in

here.' And then he added in a flustered manner, as though he'd suddenly

thought it necessary, 'But I worry about the TARDIS, you see, even though it can

come to no harm. I don't want to waste a minute if we don't have to!'

Barbara folded out a map on the back seat, looking at it with the aid of a

pocket torch. 'There should be a motel in a couple of miles, Doctor. Who knows

what it will be like, but it should have beds at least.'

'Yes, let's aim for that, Doctor,' Ian added, nodding conciliation. The Doctor

wrinkled his nose in a show of unhappiness, but said nothing more, and when

the motel lit up on the right side of the road in the headlights, he pulled the

Oldsmobile over.

As they got out and walked through the empty parking lot to the reception,

Ian pointed up at a sign sticking out over the highway, which announced 'First

motel in Oklahoma! OK!'

'Hey, Barbara,' he said quietly, nudging her to get her attention. 'We're not in

Kansas any more.'

Barbara grinned.

OKLAHOMA

It was four in the morning, and the Doctor was gunning the Oldsmobile

through Tulsa. He was getting a feel for this primitive machine now, he thought,

this gas- guzzling monster of a mode of transportation. He'd even joined

Chesterton for a look under the hood earlier and seen the appeal of its crude but

beautiful V8 engine. It was like the man himself and the species he was such a

good representative of, the Doctor thought with a little chuckle — frail but

amazingly capable, provided it was kept well-oiled and fed with the right

materials. He chuckled again, a little noise at the back of the throat that made

Susan stir in the passenger seat on his right.

'It's all right, it's all right, Susan, you carry on sleeping. I'm quite happy, just

me and the road,' he told her, looking over and smiling.

Susan groaned. 'No, that's it now. I'm awake. I'm awake.' She saw the sun

coming up and checked her watch, then gave way to more groaning. 'Ten past

four?'

The Doctor shushed her. 'Even if you're awake, keep it down, for the sake of

our sleeping beauties in the back seat there.' He nodded backwards towards Ian

and Barbara, huddled into one another, with Ian letting out the occasional

extravagant snore.

Susan gave a lilting kind of laugh. 'They're sweet. It's only when they're

asleep they cling to each other like that. They spend all their time when they're

awake pretending they don't want to. Where are we?'

'Just coming out of Tulsa, I think. It looked a rather charming place, from

what I could see of it in the dark. Now on to Oklahoma City and... and to

whatever's beyond that.'

They didn't talk for a couple of minutes; Susan tried to get herself

comfortable, wriggling like a cat against the back of her seat until she was

looking directly across at her grandfather, her legs perched up underneath her. A

railway crossing loomed up ahead; no barriers, but a freight train had already

begun its way through, and the Doctor brought the car to a halt with a mild noise

of irritation.

'Grandfather?'

The Doctor turned away from the train. 'What is it, child?'

'I just...' Susan's eyes were downturned, her voice nervous. 'I wondered...

What if we don't find the TARDIS? What if that man you gambled with has

found some way to get in and he's taken it away from this place...?'

The old man shook his head slowly, as though it were impossible — because

he knew that it was. 'It can't happen, Susan, I say it absolutely cannot happen.

We've been to hundreds of worlds and hundreds of times, and no one has ever

managed to get into the ship, no matter how hard they've tried. The people of

twenty-first- century Earth certainly couldn't break in. Even if they could, they'd

never be able to understand how to make her move. Buchanan doesn't even

know that it's anything more than what it looks like — a police box from fifty

years before his time. There's no chance of our losing the TARDIS. So you can

stop worrying about that, hmm? What do you say?'

Susan looked away from him, towards the train and the great clouds of dust

being thrown up by it in the early morning light. 'Then what if we can't find it?

It's small, and this country's so big. We could lose it forever and have to spend

the rest of our lives trapped here — can you imagine it? Trapped on Earth for

ever!'

The Doctor sighed. 'Well, the TARDIS is small, I admit. But it's not

inconspicuous here, like it was in 1963, no! In 2006, a police box is a thing to be

noticed. That's why Buchanan wanted it in the first place — because he wanted

to sell it, to auction it off in California to the highest bidder for its curiosity value,

its novelty. An old English curio, he called it. Which is why we've got to get to

that auction and either make sure it never happens or make sure we buy our

TARDIS back!'

'But it's our only link to home, Grandfather.' The girl's voice was low and not

entirely level. 'There's nothing else. If we lost the TARDIS, we'd lose our only

chance to go home again. Think about it. We'd never see any of our people

again.'

The last freight compartment had rolled by, but the Doctor didn't move on.

'Child, you know as well as I do we could never go back. We will never see our

people again. You and I have said goodbye to that life for ever.' He put out a

trembling hand and placed it gently on one of hers.

'But while we've got the TARDIS, we can dream about it, can't we?' she said,

tears beginning to trickle down her face. 'I know you do too, Grandfather, I just

know you do. I can't give up dreaming it. I don't want to!' She leaned over the

seat to him, And they huddled together in the front, just as their human friends

were huddled together in the back.

He let her cry, and kissed her forehead once. 'I miss the old life too, Susan —

the friends, the places. And you're right that the ship is every bit as important to

me as it is to you — it helps me remember all that we've left behind. But I'll get it

back for the both of us. And I promise I'll never lose it again.'

TEXAS

Barbara stared at the sky through her five-dollar sunglasses. It was blue —

cloudless and perfect and blue. The heat wave was chasing them west. She tilted

her head back and forward a couple of times, gauging the colour with and

without the benefit of the brown-tinted plastic. She decided she preferred it real,

that harsh blue that stung the eyes like the pain of a long injection; besides, she

didn't want to be left with a panda suntan. She blinked in the glare and closed

her eyes tightly, the knockout afternoon sun searing the lids red on the inside.

'When I open my eyes,' she murmured, lips and tongue sticky in the heat, 'I'm

going to be in London. In 1963.'

'Hmm? Barbara?' she heard Susan say.

'When I open my eyes, Susan,' she said louder, sounding quite determined,

'I'm going to be in London in 1963.'

Susan sounded sleepy and puzzled when she replied, ‘But then I’ll have no

one to put the sun cream on my back. I could ask Ian. I’m not asking

Grandfather.’ Barbara turned her head and looked at Susan sternly. ‘You could

ask Ian,’ she told her, but it wouldn’t do any good. Ian will be in 1963 with me.

The Doctor will just have to do it for you.’

The younger woman pushed her own sunglasses down the exquisite, snub

nose which Barbara secretly coveted. ‘You opened your eyes, Barbara. And

you’re still in Amarillo.’

Barbara raised herself on one elbow and looked at the horizon, where the low

buildings of the city soon gave way to the vast, sprawling, simmering yellow of

the panhandle plains. ‘Blast,’ she said, her brow furrowing and all her long

features drooping in mock-disappointment.

Susan giggled and waved a shapely bare arm in her friend’s direction. ‘You

know that Grandfather will get you home eventually.’

Barbara lay back down on her sun-lounger, listening to the lapping of the

pool’s fake waves a few feet away. ‘Eventually sounds like a long time — and

getting longer every minute it takes Ian and the Doctor to fix the car. I can’t keep

chasing monsters for ever. I’ve got things to do, people to be —

teacher, wife,

mother. .’

The teenager shuddered. ‘Give me monsters any day. Not little monsters.

Yuk.’

‘I’m serious, Susan! I’m spending my prime screaming at aliens, getting lost

on planets millions of trillions of miles from home, and sunning myself in

America forty years in my own future. It’s not really how I saw things working

out.’

Susan lowered both shoulder straps of her bikini — it left little to the

imagination — and reached for the factor 25. A passenger plane, fat like a

bumblebee, drifted absurdly low and slowly overhead as it came in to land, and

everything vibrated for a second to the pulse of its engines. ‘Rather be back in

Coal Hill School, would you, teaching Cortez and the Mexicans to spotty

tearaways who couldn’t care less?’

Barbara adjusted her one-piece swimsuit, glared at her pasty English skin a

little accusingly and shrugged, lying back in that all-enveloping heat the same

way she would in a warm bath. She picked up a garish-looking cocktail,

complete with theatrical umbrella and stirrer, and said, ‘I suppose there are some

compensations. .’

Ian and the Doctor appeared at the poolside, both in begrimed boiler suits

and sporting ten-gallon hats. ‘Ian and I have been shopping,’ the old man said in

response to Susan’s laughter.

‘And we’ve fixed up the Oldsmobile good and proper,’ Ian added. ‘Back on

the road whenever we’re ready — next stop Albuquerque.’

Neither of the girls moved. ‘How do you spell that?’ asked Susan. ‘And do

you mind, Ian — you’re in my sun.’

Ian moved to his left, into Barbara’s sun. ‘I can barely say it, let alone spell it.’

‘Never mind Albuquerque, my boy!’ the Doctor cried, taking off his

enormous hat and wiping the tiniest amount of sweat from his brow. ‘All that

work on the engine has left me a mite peckish. And I’ve been telling Ian about

just the place — we’ll pass it on the way out of town. The 72oz-steak house — eat

the whole steak in an hour and you get it for free!’

Ian glanced at his stomach; Susan and Barbara looked at each other and

winced. The Doctor made a surprised noise at their lack of enthusiasm. ‘They

serve rattlesnake too — fried, I’d wager,’ he offered, but found a similar lack of

takers and a more vocal display of unhappiness about the menu.

‘And pints of oil to drink, it wouldn’t surprise me,’ Barbara said, climbing off

the lounger and plunging without further hesitation into the pool.

Ian, fully clothed and still wearing his hat, jumped in beside her with an

enormous splash. He looked through his wet eyes up at the Doctor’s surprised

face, and said, ‘Just a few laps, Doctor. I’ve got to make room for the ostrich

burgers you told me about.’

‘That’s the spirit, Chesterton!’

NEW MEXICO

It was evening, after sundown, and Ian and Barbara were strolling through

the central plaza of Santa Fe, for all the world like tourists. It was fiesta season,

and there were still market stalls and traders plying their wares for the passers-

by as they walked back from restaurants to bars and hotels. Most of the wares

seemed to be dried chillies and tatty pieces of fake-Indian sculpture, but they

were still things to pick up, laugh at, put back and happily walk on, past one low

mud- coloured adobe structure to another.

‘You folks newlyweds?’ asked a gruff old vendor — all white beard and

dungarees — from whom Barbara had bought a trinket in the shape of

a Pueblo

flute-player, which she planned to give to the Doctor purely to see the expression

on his face. The two teachers just looked at each other and laughed. ‘Well, you’re

in love, anyways,’ the vendor said as he gave Barbara her change. ‘You keep it

that way, and have a good time while you’re here. Here for the fiesta?’

They couldn’t dodge that one, and Barbara quickly said, ‘That’s right. It has a

wonderful reputation, and we’re having a lovely time, thank you.’ She thought

that hit all the right notes.

The vendor’s ears pricked up. ‘Limeys, huh?’

‘From London,’ Ian joined in. ‘We’re driving the old Route 66 from Chicago

and thought we were too close to miss Santa Fe.’

‘Is that right? Hee! A couple of Limeys driving Route 66!’ The old-timer

seemed delighted. ‘Well, you kids made the right choice. This place is worth

seeing, all right. Ain’t what it used to be, some say, but I’ve lived hereabouts my

whole time and I say it’s better than ever. Yep, better than ever. Now you go off

and have a good night; if I ever make it to London, I’ll look you up! Hee! Yeah,

I’ll look you up!’

The travellers thanked him and moved on, their mood bettered for having

been exposed to such simple cheerfulness, freely given. They walked on

alongside the governor's palace and down towards the art museum, hand in

hand, leaving the glow of the floodlit mud-red cathedral behind them. It was a

nice evening to meander, still and warm but less humid than much of their

journey had been, with the scent of chilli inescapable in every breath of air.

'It's not such a bad place, is it?' Barbara's voice was relaxed.

Ian looked around for a moment. 'Bit blocky for me — hardly proper

architecture. But nice enough. Better than Texas.'

'I didn't mean Santa Fe, Ian — I didn't even mean America. I meant Earth,

2006.'

'It's not Earth, 1963, is it? Your own little personal phones so everyone can

keep tabs on you 24 hours a day; half the people are the size of buses; there are

millions of television channels solely to take advantage of idiots who don't know

better than to buy what people want to sell them —'

Barbara waved her little sculpture. 'And those of us from 1963 are exempt

from that kind of crime, are we?' She laughed. 'But it feels like home, Ian — it's

not changed that much. I bet we could walk through Trafalgar Square

or

Greenwich Park and it wouldn't be so different.'

'Stroll past the observatory,' he said, smiling into the distance.

Barbara joined in the imaginary day out. 'And down to the Cutty Sark for the

afternoon.'

'A pint of beer in a pub on the Thames — hey, you do think they still have

bitter in England, don't you?'

'I'd put money on it,' Barbara said with a grin.

Ian gawped in feigned horror. 'Don't make gambling jokes! That's why we're

on this crazy road trip in the first place. Back on the trail tomorrow, into the hills

and canyons and who knows what else of darkest New Mexico.'

Barbara shook her head. 'Don't you believe it. Do you really think even the

Doctor could take us off the main road and so far out of our way as this, just by

accident? He's up to something.'

'The thought had occurred to me too,' Ian said, raising an eyebrow. 'It's just a

question of what, and when he lets us in on it.'

They stopped, and Barbara let go Ian's hand, turning to look up at him. 'Do

you think he'll get his TARDIS back?'

'I don't doubt it for a second.'

'And do you think he'll ever get us home? To 1963? Ian, do you think

we'll

ever get our lives back?'

Ian blew out a long breath. 'One day, maybe. And in the meantime — well,

we enjoy the meantime. You do enjoy it, don't you?' He sounded as though the

thought had never occurred to him before. 'Travelling with the Doctor, I mean —

and with me?'

Barbara looked away from him, and out into Santa Fe. 'I love it, Ian.' Her

voice was taut with honesty, almost bruising. 'It's the most adventurous,

terrifying, exhilarating thing I've ever done. I'd hate to say goodbye to it. But it's

hard. It's hard for you too, isn't it?' She glanced back for reassurance. 'This is like

a holiday — no monsters, no aliens, nothing horrible happening, no one trying to

kill us, for once. But next time the TARDIS lands, it'll be back to being scared out

of my wits and making it out alive by the skin of my teeth. I am tired, Ian.'

He put a hand out and stroked her hair, tenderly. 'Do you want us to stay,

Barbara? Forty years in our own futures? We could, you know. Wave farewell to

the Doctor and the TARDIS once and for all, and go back to England, 2006…'

‘Like Japanese soldiers crawling out of the jungle after the war and saying,

“What? It’s over? When did that happen?” Barbara gave a brittle, bitter laugh at

the idea.

‘Just like that. We could.’

Barbara’s eyes were wet. ‘We couldn’t. We couldn’t do that to our friends and

families — our other friends and families, I mean. They’re waiting for us in 1963.

The Doctor will get us back there. One day. In the meantime, we work at

enjoying it. Just like you said. And we trust in this new family we’ve found

ourselves part of.’

Ian wrapped her in a bear hug, and smiled from ear to ear.

ARIZONA

‘Imagine it! Just imagine the horror!’ the Doctor was telling a school party,

while the official tour guide stood on one side, enjoying his talk in spite of

herself. ‘You’re a peaceful child of the Sinagua. All day you work hard to survive

in the forests and plains of this country. The land is tough, but good to you. It

gives you crops; it gives you beasts to catch and eat. It feeds your family and it

feeds you.

‘And then it turns on you!’ The old man theatrically slapped the front

of one

hand into the palm of another, making a couple of the smaller children jump.

‘There’s a rumbling in the land, deep earth tremors that knock you off your feet.

Some last for seconds. Some last for hours. They become more violent and more

frequent. You’re scared, your parents are scared. They turn to the tribe’s elders.

But the elders are scared too. They don’t know what to do. Should they move on,

leave this place that’s been so good to them? After all, it looks the same, it smells

the same — but then there are the tremors, earthquakes now, causing trees to

fall. Suddenly you can’t catch the same number of animals you used to for food.

Why? Because they’re more sensible than man is — they’ve all gone!’

Susan hung her head in embarrassment. ‘Honestly,’ she told Barbara and Ian,

‘we can’t take Grandfather anywhere.’

As a professional who’d led school trips that resembled the queue for

lifeboats on the Titanic, Barbara was actually rather impressed by the Doctor’s

hold over the children. ‘They don’t seem to mind,’ she said. She was right: the

thirty or so children — eight- or nine-year-olds — were lapping it up.

‘Let’s say at the last minute your tribal chief says that the land is cursed —

that some god is offended with you all — and decrees an exodus. You

pick up

your possessions and try to flee, but what if it's too late?' He assumed a more

conversational tone. 'Now tell me, have you ever heard the thunder?'

Thirty heads nodded in unison.

'Imagine the thunder — and multiply it a thousandfold! All at once, the sky is

raining fire down on you. Great chunks of the earth that's sustained you for so

long have been superheated by underground lava and are flying through the air

like shrapnel from a bombshell. The forests that you played in burst

spontaneously aflame and burn like so much tinder! You and your family run

one way, only to discover that there's a lake of lava in your path — all the fires

from the centre of the earth poured out on to your home — and it's coming your

way.' The Doctor addressed a small boy at the front of the group. 'Well, what are

you to do, hmm?'

After a moment, the boy said, 'Mister, you talk about it like you were there.'

'Perhaps I was,' the Doctor said with a wink. 'Perhaps you can be there too, if

you imagine it hard enough.'

The boy shut his eyes and imagined as hard as he knew how.

‘But many of the Sinagua survived. And when they wandered back to their

old land, they found the earth covered in ash and cinder, better for farming than

it had ever been — but with this majestic volcano soaring into the air from land

that had been only meadow before!’ And the Doctor threw an arm up to the

vivid colours of the peak of Sunset Crater, in whose shadow they were all

standing. It was a *coup de grâce* and the children recognised it, bursting into

applause for what was obviously the end of the show.

The Doctor blushed and put up a hand to signal that there was no need.

‘Have a wonderful time, children,’ he told them, ‘and learn every single thing

you can while you’re here. It’s been a pleasure talking to you — thank you most

kindly for listening.’ And with that, he wandered away from the class and back

over to where his companions were standing. ‘Hmm!’ he said as he approached

them. ‘I rather enjoyed that. Young minds, young minds, how often they’re

neglected…’ Then he carried on, Susan trailing in his wake.

‘The surly teenage temptress, the crazy, unpredictable old man…’ said

Barbara quietly as she watched them go. ‘This is a family, all right.’

‘Does that make you and me the boring, responsible middle children?’ Ian

asked cheerfully, taking her arm and not waiting for an answer.

CALIFORNIA

Ian edged the big purple Oldsmobile neatly into the Santa Monica hotel's

parking lot, carefully checked out of one side window and then the other that he

was between the two white lines, brought up the handbrake, then reached down

to the ignition and switched off the engine. He turned to the others and let out a

whoop of delight at just the moment that they did. Barbara leaned over and

hugged him; the Doctor clapped his hands in glee and embraced Susan in the

back. 'That's it, that's it!' the old man cried. Journey's end!'

'Route 66!' Ian shouted.

'Done and dusted!' Barbara said, a wide smile splashed across her face.

'Thank goodness,' commented Susan rather less enthusiastically. 'We can

finally consign this sweaty little box to the dustbin and find the TARDIS.'

Both the men looked grossly offended. 'Far from being a "sweaty little box",

this car is a classic, child, as you may have noticed en route. .'

'Never mind that, Doctor!' said Ian. 'The important thing is that we're here!

We've arrived! Santa Monica! The end of the road! Everything west of here is

Pacific!'

'That's right, Chesterton. The great American road trip —what fun it's been!'

the Doctor exclaimed excitedly. Then he coughed, edgily. 'Why, if I'd known

about it before, I dare say I might have wanted to travel it anyway.'

'Oh, is that right, Doctor?' said Barbara pointedly, incurring a nudge from

Ian. She nudged him back.

They got out and shut the Oldsmobile's doors one last time, looked out at the

Pacific, vast and blue with crashing waves that made a mockery of the name,

then wandered into the brightly lit reception. The check-in was the same as it had

been everywhere else they'd stayed, except that the Doctor asked the clerk

whether his room could have 'one of those computers in it — you know, one

with a connection to the... er, the...'

'To the internet, sir?' the clerk asked after a moment.

'Er, that's the thing,' the old man confirmed, nodding profusely and trying to

look as though it weren't important in the slightest. 'I merely thought it was time

I had a look at how this internet works,' he explained to the others in the lift.

'Why don't you come and join me in a bit, Chesterton? I imagine you'd find it

fascinating.' He coughed a little shiftily, and glanced at his watch. 'You'd better

give me an hour or two, though. I could quite do with a nap!'

Fifteen minutes later, Ian tried the handle of the Doctor's room. It was open.

There was the Doctor with his back to the door in semi-darkness, the room's

curtains drawn, sitting in his shirt sleeves at a table with a screen, tapping away

at what looked like a typewriter keyboard and angrily saying to himself, 'I most

certainly did double-click!' Ian crept into the room and got close enough to the

screen to read it for himself.

A colourful logo across the top proclaimed that it was 'RetroAuction.com'.

Below that was a photograph of the TARDIS and the words '1950s ENGLISH

POLICE BOX. Condition: reasonable. NB: will not open. Bids: 7. Time remaining:

2 mins 07 secs. Highest bidder: dr_who. Highest bid: $350.'

Ian clapped a hand on the old man's shoulder. 'Caught you red-handed!' he

said. The Doctor jumped out of his skin. 'What on earth are you up to, Doctor?'

Ian asked him, pulling a chair over to sit down next to him.

'Quiet, Chesterton, quiet!' the Doctor hissed in a stage whisper. 'We're at a

very delicate stage in proceedings. I need total silence and total concentration! I'll

explain everything in a moment!'

The screen beeped and a message flashed up. 'Oh no!' it said. 'You've been

outbid by steam_r14. Please place another bid. Time remaining: 1 min 34 secs.

Highest bid: $360.'

'Oh, no, you don't!' the Doctor snorted, his hands moving so quickly that Ian

could barely see what he was doing.

'Bid accepted! Congratulations!' the screen read again. 'You are the highest

bidder for this item at $400. Time remaining: 1 min 12 secs.'

'What is this?' Ian asked. 'Some sort of… I don't know, a computerised

auction?'

'Shush, my boy! We have to wait now.'

The two men froze over the keyboard, other than the Doctor having to keep

clicking a bit of plastic he called 'mouse' to show how the seconds had counted

down.

'Oh, no! You've been outbid by steam_r14. Please place another bid. Time

remaining: o mins 41 secs. Highest bid: $5oo.'

'I will not be outbid! That TARDIS is mine!' the Doctor shouted, his fingers

blurring over the keyboard again.

'Bid accepted! Congratulations! You are the highest bidder for this

item at

$600. Time remaining: 0 mins 23 secs.'

The Doctor was indignant. Tut that in your pipe and smoke it, Mr Steam 14 or

whatever your name is.'

'Last of the big spenders, Doctor,' Ian commented with a frown.

A nervous few seconds passed. Then, a new message flicked on to the screen:

'Congratulations! You are the winner of this item — 1950s ENGLISH POLICE

BOX. Winning bid: $600. Click here for collection details.'

The Doctor raised both arms in the air in celebration. 'Chesterton, I have just

bought back the TARDIS!'

Ian couldn't help laughing. 'So I gather,' he said, beginning to peer at the

wires stretching out of the back of the machine, 'although I admit I don't

understand how. Are lots of these computers connected together somehow, and

anyone who owns one can bid?' He took hold of the mouse and absently clicked

it. 'Careful!' warned the Doctor, but a new message had come up.

'Congratulations on winning this item — 1950s ENGLISH POLICE BOX. Item

must be collected directly from seller — Chicago, Illinois.'

The pair of them stared at the screen for a moment. Slowly, Ian put his head

in his hands and looked at the floor. 'Does that mean what I think it

means?'

'Well, I.. I fear it does, Chesterton, I fear it does.'

'And how long have you known that the TARDIS never left Chicago, Doctor?'

The old man hooted nervously, his chin raised high in the air. 'Haven't you

ever wanted to drive Route 66, eh? You must admit we all needed a holiday, and

it was quite a lot of fun... Anyway. .' Ian was unmoved. The Doctor coughed in

embarrassment and reached for the mouse. He brought up a screen that had a

large picture of an aeroplane on it and a logo that read 'quickflights.com', then

turned to Ian with a guilty smile and said, 'I'll make the reservations in first class,

shall I?'

14

Father Figure

Steve Lyons

An Adventure of the Second Doctor,

with Victoria Waterfield

She had dreamt about her father again.

She had run through the empty rooms of her old house, looking for him,

knowing in a small, sad part of her mind that he was gone.

She had found him in her bedroom, in the mirror on the dressing table, amid

all the other familiar knick-knacks — but when she had turned to face him in the

flesh, he hadn't been there.

Whirling back to the glass, she had gasped at the sight of him falling away

from her. She had reached out to him, crying for him as she hadn't done since

she was a child: 'Papa! Papa!'

But the glass had blocked her desperate fingers, and he had been swallowed

by shadows. And Victoria Waterfield had been left alone.

She woke in her *other* bedroom. In the TARDIS.

Something was wrong. Its gentle white atmosphere didn't soothe her as it

normally did.

Her first instinct was to blame the nightmare for her disconcertion. Always

before, her father had been a comforting presence in sleep, talking to her,

reassuring her that he was happy and so proud of her. She didn't remember

when she had last had one of those dreams. With that realisation came an aching

guilt.

Had he left her because she had forgotten him; because she didn't need him

any more? How could he think that was true?

The TARDIS wasn't moving. That was the difference. Normally, its subtle

motion would have lulled her through the night. How long had she slept? Not

long, she didn't think. Could they have landed again already?

Her stomach tightened at the prospect. Not another adventure. Not yet. She

wasn't ready.

But then another thought occurred to her. A worse one.

The automaton waited.

It had waited a long time. Long enough for the weeds beneath its feet to grow

wild and the bushes around it to spread their branches. Long enough for the

erosion of the standing stone tablets to become perceptible, at least to its sensors.

But it waited still, although a human mind would have long since concluded

that its vigil was pointless. It waited because the passage of time held no

meaning for it. Because it had been *programmed* to wait. And to watch.

And to believe that, one day, no matter how distant that day may yet be, the

time would come for it to stop waiting. And act.

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* * *

Victoria's suspicions were confirmed in the harsh light of the control room.

The Doctor was still there, his head buried in a panel beneath the console,

making the odd little noise to himself. She watched him for a few minutes until

he sprang out, registered her presence and greeted her with a broad grin.

‘We’re still in London, aren’t we?’ she said.

‘I’m afraid so,’ said the Doctor, his face lengthening mournfully. Then his

eyes became hooded with thought as he operated a series of controls. ‘Some

residual... blockage from the Great.. Intelligence’s web. .’ he murmured

distractedly. He stabbed at a final switch, and his eyebrows knitted together as

nothing seemed to happen. ‘Nothing to worry about. It’ll just take a few more

hours to flush out the system.’

‘I’d like to go outside,’ said Victoria.

That got his attention. He looked her up and down, appraising her; she could

see the unasked questions behind his eyes.

He must have noticed the dress, all frills and white lace. Since leaving home,

Victoria had revelled in the choice afforded to her by the TARDIS’s wardrobes,

surprised herself with her daring. Not now. Not today.

‘I… I need some fresh air,’ she tried to explain. ‘I feel all. . cooped up.’

He didn’t challenge the logic of her story, just reached for the lever that

opened the doors. ‘Well, I don’t see any harm in that,’ he said. ‘The Yeti are all

gone now.’

But as Victoria skipped past him with impatient haste, the Doctor added a

gentle caution: ‘Just be sure to stay away from the railway tracks. And don’t

wander too far.’

Voices.

Three children, laughing and playing, their words hushed by the knowledge

that they weren’t meant to be here.

The automaton had experienced such intrusions before, but they had grown

rare in recent decades. It processed the sounds and, factoring in environmental

conditions, pinpointed their source. The calculation took it a little longer than

once it would have done.

It brought its weapons systems online.

The foliage gave it cover. It moved between the bushes, diagnostic systems

noting that its movement was no longer as swift or as smooth as it had been.

It could see them now, running around the stones, throwing a bladder filled

with compressed air between them. Its left optical sensor was inoperative, but it

turned up the right to full magnification, and scanned their faces. The patterns

did not match the ones in its memory.

They had seen it.

They had ceased their games. They were pointing, and talking to each other

in concerned whispers. The automaton increased the sensitivity of its audio

receptors and scanned their conversation for key words.

They appeared to think it was a ‘caretaker’ or a ‘tramp’. One of them argued

that it was a statue, but the others shouted him down. They feared it might be

dangerous to them.

In such circumstances, the automaton was programmed to wait and observe.

Pre-emptive action would only draw attention to its presence. As long as the

humans failed to recognise its nature — as long as they remained ignorant, like

all those before them — they would be no impediment. If they did not...

The targets were out of range. But the automaton had located their most

likely entrance point to this plot of land, and charted the most direct route back

to it.

Even allowing for its reduced speed, it could reach them.

The streets were still quiet, but people were returning to them. Victoria

winced at the sounds of automobile engines, and choked on the fumes

they left

behind. She wondered how much more noisy the city would be on a normal day.

A day on which it hadn't been evacuated due to an invasion of robots.

The air was chilly, but the sun was climbing in the east. It cast its light

through the bars of the gate that still sealed off the Covent Garden underground

railway station. Sitting on the steps behind that gate, her knees brought up to her

chest, she felt like a prisoner again.

Perhaps it was for the best.

In the sanctuary of the TARDIS, it had seemed so much simpler. This was

London, after all. Her home. Her old home. Almost exactly 100 years after she

had left it. It didn't seem like such a great time span. Not after AD 3000. Not after

all the journeys to other countries, other worlds. But when she looked at it now,

through the bars, it was alien to her. Almost as alien as the quarries of Telos. In

some ways more so.

She recognised the shapes of the market buildings, remembered her father

taking her around them, and this only underlined to her how much everything

else had changed.

And that he wasn't here any more.

She heard footsteps on the pavement, approaching her, and some

instinct told

her to run. Back into the station. A jangling sound, and the squeaking of hinges.

She clambered over the turnstile again and crouched down behind the ticket

barrier.

A man in a peaked cap tramped down the stairs, fumbling with a collection of

keys. He didn't even glance in Victoria's direction. He opened the door to the

little ticket office, and disappeared through it. A moment later, a light snapped

on behind a dirty window.

And Victoria's heart was pumping, because suddenly, terrifyingly, it seemed

like fate had taken a hand. Opened the gate. Like it wanted her to do this.

An alien world. But she was closer to him than she had ever been. Since the

Doctor had given her the dreadful news; since he had whisked Victoria away in

his wonderful travelling machine, and saved her from having to think about it.

Saved her from having to go back to her old life without him.

She knew she couldn't have faced it then, couldn't have coped. But now, it

was time. Now that the Doctor had shown her there was so much else to the

universe, convinced her she could go on without him although she thought

about him every day.

Time to say goodbye. She owed him that much, at least.

Victoria crept across the booking hall, keeping one eye on the lit window.

When she reached the steps, she hitched up her skirts and broke into a run. She

was out on the street before she could give herself time to think about it, time to

doubt.

She knew the Doctor would be worried when he found her gone. He would

have helped her. Jamie too. But deep down in her stomach, she felt that this was

something private, something she had to do by herself. And anyway, she

couldn't have told him.

In an odd sort of a way, she thought it might have hurt him.

It seemed like hours later that Victoria stepped off the bus, regretting her

decision but committed to it, knowing now that she would have been missed,

wishing she had left a note or something. When the big red vehicle had pulled

up in front of her, bearing the name of the very area she needed on its front, it

had felt like fate was giving her another push.

Then there had been the altercation with another peaked cap, this man calling

himself a conductor. He had let her off the fare when she had burst into tears,

even offered her a handkerchief and asked her in a kind voice where her parents

were. She had said she was going to find them, and he'd let her know when they

had come to the right stop.

Victoria hadn't realised how much she relied on the Doctor to guide her —

even with the small things like crossing a city, finding a place she had visited a

hundred times before. She hadn't realised how much she'd relied on her father

before him.

She had no idea how she would get back to the TARDIS.

But for now, she was here.

It tugged at her heart to see the cemetery so neglected, overgrown plants

reaching through the rusted iron railings. The padlocked chain on the gates was

rusted too, as if it hadn't been used in years. She hammered on the bars with her

fists and wept, as if somebody might hear her and help. Nobody came.

When her father had brought her here, as a child, the lawns had been well

tended. Victoria had been able to hear the birds in the sky, not the growling of

car engines and the hammering of— what was that? — some kind of builders'

tool in the distance. It had been, if not beautiful, then at least tranquil.

A fine

resting place. Papa had told her that Mama was at peace here, and that she

would always be remembered.

He would have found his way here. She was sure of that. Even though he had

died on that terrible world...

She had to take care of herself for once. There was nobody else.

She followed the railings until she found a pair that had been bent apart,

leaving a gap through which she could just about squeeze her petite form.

Inside the cemetery, weeds dragged at her ankles and thorns caught on her

skirts. She couldn't see the path; no doubt it was overgrown too. All she could do

was keep struggling onward until she came to it. Then she could get her

bearings. But suddenly, her foot touched something in the undergrowth.

Something soft and bulky. Something unexpected. She stumbled, and put out

her hands to save herself.

They brushed against something clammy, and she gasped as she realised

what it was.

Another hand. Connected to an arm. Connected to a body, pale and dirty,

half buried, unmoving. And small.

For a moment, she thought somebody had opened a grave as a cruel prank.

But the body was fresh, its face untouched by decay. The child could almost have

been sleeping. Except that there was a red, sticky, melted mass where his chest

and stomach ought to have been. And, nestling in the midst of that mass,

incongruously: a football.

Victoria gasped and averted her eyes, feeling a surge of nausea. She had seen

death before — all too often, it seemed, since the Doctor had entered her life —

but she knew she would never, ever get used to it.

It was all too much. She couldn't deal with this. She needed the Doctor. She

needed her father. She needed someone to advise her, to help her, to take the

responsibility from her hands.

And, casting around in desperation, backing away from her gruesome

discovery, she found someone.

He was standing, watching her from the bushes, silent and still.

She was almost overcome with relief. He had to be a groundskeeper. A man

in authority. But she stopped herself before she could run to him. If he was a

groundskeeper, then why were the grounds in such a state? And if he was meant

to be here, then surely he would have come in by the gate — but the gate hadn't

been opened.

There was another possibility, and it made her feel cold.

'Oh,' she gasped, unable to hold in the exclamation, although there was no

one around to hear it. 'Oh, no! Oh, please, no!'

Victoria knew she should run, but she didn't — because now the man was

striding purposefully towards her, and she could see...

She was frozen to the spot, gaping at him, gaping at something that couldn't

be. It couldn't...

But she would have known that face anywhere...

The automaton's wait was over.

The young female's face matched the one in its memory. It hadn't even had to

compensate for increased age, although so much time had passed. It did not

question this discrepancy. Its masters had programmed it to recognise and

destroy the human identified as Victoria Waterfield, and now she was here. It

needed to know no more.

But there was an unanticipated variable. The female had stopped some way

short of the primary location: the headstone. Like the children before her, she

was out of weapons range. If the automaton was aware of its own

culpability in

this setback, it spared no processing time for self-recrimination.

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It compared its options. It could cut her off from her nearest exit point — the

gap in the railings — as it had with the children. But there was a risk that the

female might know this land, might take another route and confound it. Once,

the automaton would have been able to exceed her pace, but that was uncertain

now. However, it had one more weapon: the greatest one in its armoury.

Its masters had known that emotions, and irrational connections to each

other, were the weaknesses of soft, organic life forms. They had sculpted the

automaton's face, its hair, its synthetic clothing into a form that the female would

find impossible to resist.

The automaton started forward, certain that its appearance would confuse its

target, maybe even bring her to it, gain it the seconds it needed. It brought its

weapons systems back online. And, to complete the illusion, it spoke in a voice

that had also been meticulously crafted:

'Victoria! Victoria, oh, thank goodness you're here. I've been waiting so long,

but everything's all right now. Come to Papa, Victoria. Come to Papa!'

The monster was trying to say something.

Victoria thought she recognised her own name, but it came out as a slurred

electric buzz, something familiar wrapped up in a nightmare.

Like the monster itself. It was supposed to resemble her father; that much she

could tell. But the flesh had peeled away from part of its face, to reveal gold

circuitry. Its left eye was dead, the socket surrounded by burn marks, and the

pupil of the right flashed with an internal red light. It moved jerkily, dragging its

right leg behind it, a mass of coloured wiring protruding from a gash in its knee.

And it reached out to her, electricity sparking blue from its fingers and

discharging to the ground like miniature lightning bolts.

She was terrified, but angry too. Who could have done this? Created this. .

this *abomination*? This mockery of a man whom she had loved so much, who had

made her feel safe, and now she feared she would never find comfort in her

dreams of him again.

Then her instinct for self-preservation took over, and Victoria ran. Not back to

the railings, though — and that, she thought with a plunging feeling, was a

terrible mistake. She threw a frightened glance back over her shoulder, and saw

that the monster was giving chase, its damaged leg giving it a lurching gait but

hardly seeming to slow it down. There was no way back for her now. No way

out. But in that desperate moment of decision, she knew with hindsight, she had

been unable to turn her back on her father — her real father. If she'd fled to the

street, it would have felt like she was abandoning him again.

She didn't get far. She couldn't run in her Victorian skirts — they kept

threatening to trip her — and she had no idea where she was going. And

suddenly the fence at the other side of the cemetery loomed before her and she

had to change course or be cornered — but the monster had anticipated this and

it was moving to intercept her. Victoria shrieked, and found a renewed burst of

speed. She passed the monster, but it had gained ground on her.

And she was backed up to the side of a crypt, and it was advancing. She

couldn't run left or right — it was too close; it would catch her — she could only

shrink against the wall and try to plead with it although she was choking on her

tears.

And the sparks from its hand had gathered into a ball of hissing, spitting blue

death.

The Doctor came to her rescue, of course.

The automaton's sensors hadn't detected his approach. He was suddenly

there, his tousled appearance tripping alarm bells in its head.

Its masters had known that, when Victoria Waterfield came here, the Doctor

might come with her. Destroying her would fulfil the automaton's programming;

destroying him would exceed expectations.

He was red-faced, out of breath, jumping around, waving a device in the

automaton's face. Something tubular and silver. The automaton rounded on him,

retargeted its weapons systems, and brought up its hand.

The Doctor pedalled away from it, his eyes bulging out of his head. The

automaton unleashed a bolt of destructive energy, but somehow he twisted and

turned and ducked under it, rolling to the ground beside a patch of newly

scorched earth, knocking his little bow-tie askew.

It needed a moment to recharge. The Doctor took advantage of that fact.

He was on the automaton, all arms and legs, confusing its sensors. And

suddenly, he thrust the tubular device into its empty left optical socket.

Its audio receptors were overloaded by a shrill, high-pitched shriek. They

blew out, taking one side of its head with them. It was reaching up, clawing at its

own eye with hands that were sluggish to respond to its commands, trying to

remove the enemy device but unable to reach it.

And that shriek was growing louder, more intense, juddering through its

metal skeleton, shaking its joints apart.

Too late, it accepted that its electronic life was over, gave up trying to save

itself and turned instead to its closest target, seizing upon its last chance to fulfil

its programming.

The girl, Victoria, threw up her hands and let out an ear-splitting scream that

only added to the cacophony inside the automaton's head. Her image ran red

and strobed, baffling its targeting array, but it couldn't muster the power to do

her harm anyway.

The last thing the automaton registered was an error report from the engines

that drove its legs, as the ground rushed up to meet its remaining optical sensor.

'How did you know where I was?' she asked, once the panic had subsided.

Once the Doctor had retrieved his sonic device and the flickering flames inside

the monster had died down.

'Oh, my dear Victoria,' he said, 'I'm just sorry I didn't see it earlier.'

His face

clouded. ‘Even a bunch of soulless killers could work out what you needed better

than I could. They knew you’d come back here, one day.’

‘Then that. . that *thing* waited for me. .’

‘For a century, yes. A monumental act of spite on the Daleks’ part. They knew

your father would have a memorial somewhere in the area. They sent their

replica to find it. Fortunately for us, they didn’t know it would be waiting quite

as long as it was.’ He poked the dead monster with a toe, and something inside it

— some mechanism — groaned, making Victoria jump. ‘It was shielded against

electrical attack, bullet-proof and as strong as ten men — but in the end, it was

no match for a hundred years of your English weather.’

‘I suppose everything dies in time,’ said Victoria, in the quiet voice of a child.

The Doctor looked at her. ‘Yes,’ he said softly. ‘I suppose it does.’

She had said her farewells, but she couldn’t bring herself to leave yet.

The headstone had been there for as long as she remembered — and,

although it was crumbling, although the inscriptions had become hard to read, it

seemed in this moment that it would be there forever.

She had seen her mother’s name in the stone before. Many times. She

had

caught her breath as she had seen her father's beneath it, although she had

known to expect it. She had thought it would look newer.

She'd apologised to them both for having stayed away so long, for not having

been a dutiful daughter. She realised, with a lump in her throat, that even with a

time machine she could not correct that mistake. She couldn't come to visit them

in an earlier year, because the replica would be waiting for her.

When she thought she might be ready, she looked for the Doctor.

He was waiting for her with boundless patience, at the end of a pathway that

she could just make out now. At the cemetery gates, which he had managed to

open somehow.

He caught her gaze and smiled, and Victoria smiled back at him and went to

him.

Her best friend. Her protector. She knew she loved him.

But she also knew now, as if for the first time, what he wasn't and could not

be. She had expected to have trouble sleeping — but with the TARDIS in flight

and Jamie in the next room, snoring, oblivious, she had felt as if she were home

again. For now. Now that she was leaving.

She had expected to dream of her father, but she hadn't. It was all

right,

though. The others were up already, muted voices drifting to her from the

control room. She would go to them soon, be a part of their world again.

But for now, she lay and stared up at the ceiling of her room, letting its white

expanse clear her thoughts. She drew in a deep breath and let it go, almost

surprised but relieved to find that she felt no different now than she had last

night.

It had been so long. So long since she had allowed herself to think about the

future.

Victoria had expected to find two names on her parents' headstone. She had

found them. But there should have been three, if only she had thought about it.

Almost exactly 100 years. She had been a child then. In many ways, she still

was.

But she wouldn't go back.

22

The Bad Guy

Stephen Fewell

An Adventure of the Third Doctor,

with Jo Grant

Here, on the beach, just before twilight, was where it was to have ended.

Like this, as I remember.

‘Whenever I think of you,’ she said, ‘I’ll always remember you with fondness

—’ She’d been trembling as she took my hand, her rings clustered cold against

my fingers.

‘-- and that time, together, in the control room.’

She smiled wistfully, blinking back some tears.

I did not.

After everything we had been through, emotion was not a luxury I could

readily afford.

What to say?

It was too hard to put into words all the thoughts she had inspired. The

dwelling I wanted to build her upon the ruins of the settlement, sown with

memory plants like saddleweed and eglantine. How my half-father would love

her mischievous chuckle. What our children might achieve with her looks and

my strength. There was so much to be said.

I opened my mouth and none of it came out.

Somehow I had to show her.

Her head inclined as I moved in for the kiss, and my lips only connected with

the very corner of her mouth and the soft of a cheek. Then she gave the tiniest of

hums before slowly drifting backwards — squeezing my hand with the firmness

of finality.

Shortly, she let it drop.

Fondness, I observe, is not far from pity.

‘Come along, Jo,’ he’d said, placing a guiding arm around her shoulder and

steering her towards the indigo box. Holding her.

‘Thank you for looking after her, Ptela. Keeping her safe. I’m most grateful.’

As if she had never been mine for a moment.

The steely gaze said everything — ‘I’ve won. I’m used to winning. So don’t

try to beat me.’

I’d seen that look before, in the moments before he triggered the countdown.

‘Won’t you stay?’ I found myself begging. ‘Help us to rebuild our world.’ How

demeaning. Anything to get her to stay.

In answer she did nothing but smile, squeezing her lips together at the same

time.

‘Your people must find their own answers, Ptela,’ he announced loftily, his

handshake warm and dry. ‘But I can think of no better person to lead them.

Good luck.’

I did my best to commit her face to memory, aware that I was not doing a

good enough job.

Too proud to ask her to stay; too angry to allow her to see howl felt.

One day, he went on to say, they would return to see how my people were

getting along. Whether he meant it or not wasn't the issue.

It was clearly meant to be an end to the matter.

Quite different then to how it began.

We were deep within the craft. The walls had been darker there, like dirty

snow or a flaw in the heart of a crystal.

Roshon had been staggering, leaning against me for support then pulling

away as if the very touch of my skin scalded him.

By that time the seething purple mass had almost entirely subsumed the left

of his body. I had to call his name every other moment to remind him who he

was. Terrible.

Together, using what little we had of our strength, we had begun to prise

apart the bulkhead.

But there was no need.

With horrific speed, two vinelike growths sprang from the shattered remains

of his left arm and, at their caress, the portal spiralled apart. As it did

so, emitting

the chill of a large chamber beyond, someone tottered through it, backing away

from the twitching fronds of a Thrematon horde. They chittered and seethed

malevolently.

To be frank, I remember being more petrified of her.

With her elongated limbs and alarmingly wide blue gaze, my first thought

was that she could only be the outcome of another of their hideous

transformations. But as I gazed at her in panic, and the shrill cry from her mouth

subsided, I knew it would be my job to protect her.

She had glanced back at her pursuers, as if to decide whether she was safer

with them or us. Their sibilant approach and writhing tentacles made her choice

a swift one.

Purposefully, Roshon moved forward, pushing us firmly behind him. Sweat

was pouring from his brow as he fought to control his limbs one final time.

‘Leave,’ he gasped, staggering forward to block their path. ‘Leave now.’ I had

never known him put others before himself.

Jo had clutched my arm in horror as the Thrematon horde entwined his

stumbling form. A deathlike chill blanketed us. Their whispers of triumph filled

the wintry air before the opaque bulkhead swirled shut, cutting him off from

view forever.

The shock felt still, like the moment before a wave returns to the sea. It was

white in colour. She had been stripy.

I had grabbed her wrist as we ran.

* * *

Now he was groping for mine, hastily kneeling beside me. The only pulse

was the triumph-drum in the hills above the shore.

‘I don’t know much about Ancetetian physiology, Jo.’ His face furrowed with

concern as he rubbed the back of his neck.

I had allowed my body to drop to the sand almost without thinking. The

earth shook a little as if sensitive to my fall.

‘There doesn’t seem to be a pulse, but for all I know that may well be quite

normal. Perhaps the modified mutagene is attacking his metabolism in some

way.’

Jo expressed concern that the Thrematons might not have all perished in the

explosion. Perhaps there were other ships in orbit.

If that were the case, there was no way they could just leave. Was there?

I raised one arm and gestured towards the interior of their ship. ‘Help me,’ I

managed to rasp, hoping they would hurry me inside.

After a while, they did.

The floor of the chamber was cool after the hot sand of the beach. It was vast.

But lying there, I found myself largely enthralled by my view of his nostrils

as his hands deftly roamed over the plinth before him. ‘The TARDIS isn’t

detecting any activity in orbit, Jo.’

I groaned, distracting her from this outcome.

‘Doctor, I think he’s getting worse.’ She held my hand, as he strode off into

the ship. ‘Don’t worry,’ she whispered, kissing and rubbing my hand as if it were

cold. ‘Whatever they’ve done to you, the Doctor will put it right.’

My mind started to race.

He would be able to, wouldn’t he? He had that air about him.

After all, mere hours ago the world was ending; Roshon just the first of a

thousand casualties blossoming into hideous life.

Now, it was over. Hundreds of Thrematons destroyed in the explosion. Many

more undone when he — what was it? — reversed the polarity of their trans-fie-

lum-mew-ta-jen.

The whole impossible situation resolved in little more than a day’s span. It

was a transformation just as great as any they had triggered.

So, I knew I may only have seconds more of her company.

‘Stay with me, Jo.’

‘Don’t worry, Ptela, I’m not going to leave you. The Doctor’s fetching the

medical kit.’

Everything would be fine, she said.

‘Don’t go.’

‘I’m not going anywhere,’ she repeated, ‘until you’re better.’

‘You saved my life back there.’

I had nodded, too dazed from fear and grief at Roshon’s loss. It was my

brother who had saved our lives, I corrected her as we fled the bloated

Thrematon craft.

She had said she understood, sweetly, eyes downcast. She had lost her friend

too. We took shelter in the depths of the forest, moving whenever we heard the

felling approach. As we crouched numbly in the gloom, she had gently asked for

the story from the start, and had listened with care: occasionally repeating key

events as if committing them to memory like an elder.

I had told how, hair matted, Roshon had screamed as it began. How all

around bodies had fallen to the earth.

How the ships appeared on the Sabbath, lowering silently in the sky above

our settlement. Thick, dark fluid falling upon the roofs, clogging our chimneys.

Children crying as it stung their eyes.

Then, how they had twisted and driven their way into the ground. Piles of

earth sucked upward into steaming heaps. Finally, only the burnished heads

were exposed to the sepia sky, the body of the craft buried like a tic in a

waterhound.

Two days later, Roshon had fallen ill.

That evening he had complained of the heat, before choking on his supper of

algal gruel. Then, doubling up in agony, the first sporocyst erupted from his dark

skin. Strange currents flowed beneath the surface of his shivering body. When

they stopped, his stare was glassy. His spoon had clattered to the floor.

Finally I told how, as he had stalked from the settlement, others joined. The

surface of the craft embraced them like sacrifices.

Throughout, she had gasped at the horror of it, and touched my arm in

sympathy. They had to be stopped, she said, with a strange mixture of

confidence and uncertainty.

Then her questions started. What had I noticed inside the ship? How long did

the transformation take to progress? Had anyone ever recovered? The details

seemed important to her.

Perhaps she wanted to tell them to the friend she kept mentioning. Perhaps

she had forgotten he was dead.

Eventually she looked at me, her eyes strafing my features in puzzlement.

‘They said —’ she had stammered. ‘They told us you were monstrous.’ Roshon

was monstrous now. Perhaps, to them, that was beauty.

Together we huddled in the undergrowth, united in grief and uncertainty.

‘Don’t worry,’ I remember saying to reassure her, ‘I’m not going to leave you.’

Now she was saying the same to me.

Putting that to the test seemed the only way.

As I lay there in the calm of their ship, I could see the underside of some sort

of control panel. Blinking lights and a wattle of complex coloured reeds were

masked only by her concerned expression. Those soulful eyes.

How could I be doing this?

She would have to stay. If I were to break it, tear out some vital component,

there would be no way for them to depart. Then again, the power humming

through the instruments might be unleashed upon me, and even if it could be

done, she would never forgive such a destructive action.

No, there was only one way.

I allowed her face to fall out of focus hoping my gaze would seem remote.

And glassy. Despite no longer making her out, I could feel her concern intensify.

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She called for the Doctor. He would be back any moment with that medical

equipment. I had to do it now.

It made her scream, but it was the only way.

‘We are the Thrematon horde,’ I rasped. ‘You cannot defeat us.’

As darkness had fallen the crash of trees stopped, replaced by a new sound.

One that had filled my heart with a new hope. Drums.

It was a sign that somewhere people had survived, defiant in the face of

aggression. Either that or they had yet to encounter what we were up against. I

had explained to Jo that Roshon had been the percussionist in our family. As

such he represented our interests in the tympanic bargaining at the beginning of

every market day. He would always get the very best prices for our castor

baskets.

‘You talk about him a lot,’ she remarked. ‘You must have been very close.’

I had explained it was our custom to honour the departed by passing the day

of their death talking about their achievements and impact upon our lives. She

wasn't sure if she was up to that.

Eventually she had tried.

'The Doctor is —was, well, a sort of scientist,' she began, 'and my uncle

wangled me a job as his assistant. Skivvy, really, as it turned out, but I didn't

know that at first. Holding test tubes, you know, that sort of thing.'

I didn't.

She had sniffed a lot and looked at the ground. Something in her eye, she

shrugged. She couldn't understand how she could miss home so much so

quickly. Now, she said, she might never get back.

I knew then that I would be the one to look after her, to make her smile again

and help her forget.

'Turned out,' she went on, 'he wasn't really a scientist at all. At least, not an

ordinary one. He had secrets.

'But we were friends right from the off, more or less. Once he got past that

whole trying-to-kill-him thing.'

She had seemed quite oblivious to the absurdity of it.

I had laughed. Then so had she. And we both did, together, for a long time —

almost to hysteria.

It did, she eventually agreed, feel better.

But it was some time before she began again, and by that time, I was already

in love with her.

I was hoping that she would follow me alone.

That way, once I had separated them I might have dropped the pretence and

had a chance to explain. Without him around she had been so different; less

uncertain about speaking her mind, less anxious for approval.

It was not to be.

As I lumbered mechanically back out into the sunset, she ran off to fetch him.

Leaving the mystical space of their craft and heading into the forest, I could only

ensure I broke enough branches that my path could be traced. No idea where to

go, though. How could she have chosen him over me?

As in answer, the earth trembled once more.

When the Thrematon ships had burrowed into the ground they had clearly

roused the spirits who dwelled there. After the explosions, who knew what

would it take to appease their restless anger?

If the world were still ending, it would do so with us together. Because,

despite the Doctor, she was following me.

They were old enemies, she had explained, although she didn't really know

why. That's how it had all happened.

This man, the Master, and her friend had known each other a long time. Had

a rivalry that locked them forever in a sort of pattern. The Master would have

some kind of plan, Jo had said. On this occasion, to dominate her planet and

conquer its inhabitants.

'A bad guy,' she said. 'You know, like the Thrematons.'

And whenever they came across him, this Master had tried to kill the Doctor.

Often in the most elaborate ways.

Sometimes he had held her captive, to force the Doctor into danger.

Hypnotised her, gazing deep into her eyes. Forcing her to carry out his will.

Hello, Miss Grant, he would say with a knowing air, as if he enjoyed being

caught while up to no good.

He was almost charming, she concluded.

Except when he was trying to kill the Doctor.

'I bet he'd give anything to be here now. To see what's happened.' This time

it was hard to tell if she were sobbing or laughing.

Back then, I had wondered what on earth her friend could have done that

someone should go to such lengths.

Back then.

Now, as I stalked through the forest, I started to understand.

Every so often I would have to stop. It was the only way to tell if they were

keeping pace with me. Whenever I heard his strident tones, I would set off once

more.

Eventually I came to one of the clearings. Fallen trunks littered the ground.

Abandoned engines lay to the left and right, branches protruding from their

maws like monsters frozen mid-meal.

This was one of the places they had rigged their equipment; slim masts that

broke the surface of the forest floor and stretched upward to where the leaf

canopy once grew — sinister substitutes for the forest's former occupants.

Even now the spheres attached to them still gave off a chill.

Behind me I heard them emerge from the foliage.

'There he is!' she cried. She used to clutch my arm that way.

I turned and did my best hiss of defiance.

* * *

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Just as they had done when they had captured us.

Back then, our plan had been foolhardy, but in her presence you'll have

noticed my sense of risk to be somewhat reduced.

At first we thought the chill was the approach of nightfall, but soon I was

shivering. My open-necked jerkin was designed for midday in the forge and so

afforded little protection.

Dangerous as it was, we had decided the only way to keep warm was to

move onward through the forest. Breath cloudy on the air, it was not long before

we came across more of the Thrematons' handiwork.

Ice crystals sparkled on every branch. A staring tree shrew was poised mid-

journey around the girth of a trunk. Leaf litter had crunched beneath my

moccasins.

And beyond all this, a frozen nothing as far as the eye could see, where once a

mighty forest had stood. The very air was petrified.

That's when, in the freezing deadness, Jo had decided there was nothing to

lose.

They were a monument, he said, to the defeat of the Thrematons, so on his

instructions the pylons had been left standing. As I weaved around them, my

palm almost adhered to their cold surface.

Terror-forming he had called them. And they had been.

But he had explained that, just as they had done with our bodies, these masts

were meant to change the world so it was more to their liking. As if that wasn't

what he did.

I staggered and fell. The tremors were becoming increasingly violent.

How dare he just swan off? Leave things this way; the whole of creation

sickening and crying out in indignation.

That's when I changed direction for the settlement. I don't know why.

Perhaps because it was where it all began. It was where I had planned the

two of us should live once this was over. Still could, in the right circumstances.

It seemed a fitting place to end things, because I finally understood this man

that Jo had told me about.

This must be how he felt. The bad guy.

The vast burnished resin hull of the Thrematon ship curved skywards. We

were to scale it.

Somewhere in there, where I had rescued — then lost — my brother, we

would make a stand. In there, where Jo had seen her friend perish, dark matter

erupting from his skin like jam squeezed through a muslin bag. I gripped the

coarse rope and climbed ever upward.

‘Grab my hand.’

The wind was whipping her hair into her eyes. Above us, not far ahead, I

could make out some sort of indentation or pore in the surface.

On the ground below, the Threatons were spitting upward, hitting the hull

below us as we climbed.

‘Don’t let it touch you,’ I yelled, the wind catching at my words.

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We had squeezed through the sphincter-like opening into the glacier

corridors of their ship. Whispering filled the air.

Jo looked at me in sudden terror. She told me she had never done this sort of

thing without the Doctor.

Then she had smiled.

Taking my hand, she pressed it to her lips.

‘What are you doing?’ I had asked, returning the gesture in puzzlement. It

turned colder. That’s where it ended.

Because that’s when we were taken.

The Threatons had finally won.

This was how our victory looked.

The remains of my village teetered on the edge of the vast crater where the

Threaton mother ship had once sat. Earth and volcanic glass poured down its

sides towards the shimmering haze at its bottom.

The heat was unbearable, catching the roofs of the few remaining dwellings.

It was as if all the heat the Thrematons had stolen had been released from

imprisonment to roar out its freedom.

None of this made sense, I was aware of that. I just couldn't think of another

way to keep her with me.

The hot earth shook.

I ignored their cries to wait.

We sat there for a long time. Waiting to die.

Occasionally the cell would thrum with power as, somewhere nearby, the

Thrematons continued their hideous work.

The cold, I remember, seemed to follow them around.

Eventually she had broken the silence.

'Ptela, would you —' She interrupted herself awkwardly.

I asked her what the matter was, but it took some time for a response. 'I was

going to ask if— if you would hold me.'

I asked her if she was cold, but no. It was a custom on her world, used to

comfort the worried or distressed.

It did not work.

As I carefully placed my arm around her, her whole frame shook and her

breathing changed alarmingly. But I was not to stop, she said, until she felt better

And as I held on to her, I found my body responsive to the muted flutter of her

body, her — what was it? — heartbeat. Time slowed. I held her, as tight as I

dared, feeling a new world pulsing within her small frame. Awoken from a life

only half lived.

Eventually, she had told me to let go now.

On the lip of the crater, the sulphur made my eyes stream. I was so tired that I

could barely maintain a standing position.

‘Fight it, Ptela,’ he was shouting. ‘The Thrematons are controlling your mind.’

Coaxing me to focus on his voice, he stalked across the ash towards me. Jo

followed in his wake, half crouching in his silhouette.

Slowly he withdrew something from his pocket. It span and glinted with light

from the burning below. His voice held a mixture of gentleness and command at

the same time. I felt myself giving up, but gladly. Jo hung behind, completely out

., of view now. Soon he was close enough to grip my shoulders. His cuffs

scratched my bare skin. Looking deep into my eyes, I knew it would not be long

before he saw the deception. I couldn’t avoid his gaze.

‘Ptela.. ?’ He frowned.

He would have told her. What else could he have done?

This was what the Master had known. Only with him out of the way could

things be the way I wanted.

I twisted away, and pushed.

‘I’d like you to have this,’ she’d said, reaching for something around her neck.

‘What’s the matter?’ I asked, as her face fell into a frown.

‘My locket,’ she said. ‘I’ve just remembered I — I lost it. On our last trip.’ She

slipped a ring off her finger instead. Her pale skin had darkened. I didn’t

consider she might have been lying.

‘I’m fine,’ she said hurriedly, avoiding my question.

‘Among my people, a reddened face is a sign of hunger.’

‘Oh, no,’ she said, ‘I’m blushing.’ She pressed my hand against her cheek.

Then she gave me the ring, and held me.

‘Jo,’ I found myself saying, ‘I am truly honoured. I accept.’

Still locked in an embrace, we fell.

The screes were sheer and stung, and it was impossible to gain a footing. We

tumbled down through the sulphurous haze towards the burning light below.

The ground lurched and cracked.

Hitting a rock finally dislodged his grip. I grasped frantically for a hold on its

blackened surface. It scorched, but I managed to get one, glancing

round to see

him falling onwards, faster than before.

Eventually, further down where the gradient became less steep, the Doctor

also came to rest. He lay prone for a while, but soon was calling instructions to

me. Before long, a rope spiralled down towards us. Overhead, Jo was shouting

something too.

Immediately though, she was drowned out by a tremendous groaning as the

ground lurched beneath us. Sand and earth slid past each side like a river.

Gripping on for life, my body was pummelled by a wall of heat.

I turned, shielding my eyes from the glare of the glowing lava that was

bubbling where just seconds before he had lain.

The yellow smog lifted for a moment.

Just long enough to see the Doctor totally submerged by the molten lake.

* * *

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From behind the resinous bulkhead had come a dull crump. The tiny cell

shook. Jo staggered on her hooves, clutching at me for support. Her eyes were

wide, like a startled animal. I couldn't help but gaze at her.

‘The Thrematons,’ she had gasped. ‘They’ve started the countdown.’

I pulled her tight towards me. Water fell from her trembling face on to my

forearms.

Burnt air rushed into the space, and sparks burst from the entrance. The

harder she had held me the less it all mattered.

With a shriek the bulkhead irised open. There he stood, stick outstretched.

‘Doctor, you’re alive!’

‘You killed him!’ she cried.

I had.

‘We are the Thremato—‘ I began, but was too exhausted from the climb to go

any further.

‘Jo,’ I finally gasped, ‘I’ve fallen in love with you.’

But she was ignoring me. Staring down into the crater for a sign of hope.

‘I interfered with their individual climate control,’ he had said, grinning.

‘Turned, if you like, their central heating up.’ A small sphere glittered between

his fingertips. Behind him, I could see the bodies of several Thrematons. Even in

death, some were slowly returning to Ancetetian form.

‘Until their terraforming was complete they were each relying on these little

things. Portable atmosphere.’ He tossed it into his pocket.

Jo was ecstatic. ‘But you were dead,’ she had said. ‘You were infected by that

purple fungus thing. I saw you.’

He tweaked her tear-stained cheek.

‘I’m afraid their little attempt at genetic engineering didn’t bargain with a

Time Lord metabolism, Jo. Eventually my own DNA persuaded their mutagene

to work for me, undo all the work it had done. It was quite a pleasant micro

molecular conversation as I recall. Nice line in witty repartee, Thrematon

mutagenes.’

He waggled his ears.

‘Portable atmosphere,’ he glared. His jacket was smoking.

‘Useful for keeping your cool.’

The small sphere dropped to the earth, rolling away from the steaming edge

of the crater. She ran to his side.

I was suddenly fearful of what he might do to me. The most frightening

thought was that he might forgive me.

He had shown no mercy to the Thrematons.

They had already witnessed what he could do to their technology, he had

said. Before long the Ancetetians they had transformed would be back to normal.

It was not too late though to stop the countdown, dismantle their terraforming

equipment and return to their own planet.

32

Strangely, in his presence, their whispering took on a kind of sense. Only

worlds unspoiled by pollution and technology were suitable for them, they

chanted, and this one was the only one for thousands of light years.

I never did discover what their decision had been, for at that point he had

told me to go and release the other captives from the cells, and flee the craft.

Instinctively, I obeyed. I don't know why.

I took the explosion as an answer of sorts. It wasn't until I had picked myself

up from where the blast had blown me that I realised.

Jo hadn't come with me to help.

This time, however, he left us alone together.

To end things, I heard him advise her, sometimes someone has to be the bad

guy.

'Can't we just. .' she began, 'be friends.' The words came easily, as if she had

said them before. I think perhaps she had.

'You don't understand — I only did it for you. I did it all for you, Jo. Without

you, winning means nothing.'

'I can't stay with you,-Ptela,' Jo cried. 'This place is so different from my

home. I could never live on your world.'

'We could go somewhere else. Take me with you.'

'My planet is so different to yours.' Her tone said better, not different. 'You'd

never adjust.'

Any excuse.

'It's not an excuse, Ptela. We can't take you. The Doctor won't take you. Not

after what you've done.'

So it finally came out that I was right. It was the Doctor.

Every time we had talked about him she'd been hesitant. As if she were

frightened by what she might say. As if putting it into words might cheapen or

betray it. As if she might be forced to acknowledge feelings best glossed over.

And when I asked her what was really going on between them, I glimpsed an

anger and fight I'd never seen directed at the Thrematons.

'Why can't you accept that it is not going to happen? It just cannot happen. I

don't want anything more from you.'

Then why did she ever, even for a second, allow me to believe that it could?

Silence descended then.

I thought for a long time before I could say these words in return. By then of

course Jo had long since gone.

But I say them still to the ring she gave me; imagining things had ended

differently. Each time they get a little more apt, a little more formal. And each

time they offer a little more consolation and a little less hatred.

This time they are like this —

‘Thank you for your kindnesses to me, but you never should have given

them. Thank you for showing interest in me. You never should have done.

‘For all your protests, you didn’t need a friend, Jo. I am sure you must have

plenty already.

‘You just wanted to leave without feeling any guilt or responsibility.

‘If you had never kissed me, I’d never have dreamed you could have been

mine. That future, those possibilities, those hopes would never have taken shape

in my imagination. Now, in time, I might well have dismissed them, but a hope

unfulfilled never fully dies.’

As hard to kill as the Doctor.

And now I can see, clearer than ever, that she’s just like the Thrematons.

Planting something in my heart that has changed me, and will never die.

Separation Day

Andy Campbell

An Adventure of the Third Doctor,

with Sarah Jane Smith

‘I’m delighted to meet you in the flesh at last,’ the hologram said. ‘First of all,

allow me to offer you a cup of tea — the first cup of properly made tea, I’m

willing to bet, that you will ever have tasted.’

The hologram approached us, slipping silkily through her polished steel desk

and reforming with a delicate little whisper on our side of it. She looked eagerly

at me with her huge blue eyes, then at Tom, then at me again, as if willing us to

accept her offer. For a moment — perhaps through a glitch in her program,

perhaps for deliberate emphasis — her smile stretched impossibly wide for her

face. The effect was disconcerting, but the hospitality seemed genuine.

‘We are probably unique in the entire Earth Empire,’ the hologram said, ‘in

that we still insist on adhering to all 11 of the golden rules for preparing the

perfect cup of tea, as laid down by George Orwell on 12 January 1946.’

Tom and I exchanged a wary glance.

‘Indian tea only,’ said the hologram. ‘Use a china or earthenware teapot.

Warm the pot first. Make the tea strong. Never imprison the tea-leaves in a bag.

Take the teapot to the kettle and not the other way round, so that the water is still

boiling at the moment of use. Shake the pot after preparing the tea. Be sure to use

a cylindrical cup. Remove the cream from the milk before adding it. Put the tea

in the cup first, and the milk second. And finally, of course, no sugar.'

After all this detail it seemed impolite to decline, but Tom and I were keen to

get through the interview without unnecessary delay.

'Perhaps later?' he said, looking at me.

'Yes, maybe a little later,' I agreed.

'Of course,' said the hologram, acknowledging our decision with a little bow

of her head. 'Well, on to business.'

While waiting outside in the reception suite I had imagined our interviewer

in a formal business suit, but the hologram was dressed in what appeared to be a

pale blue ball-gown. As she drifted around her gleaming metallic office, the dress

fluttered and billowed in an exaggerated romantic fashion, as if she had been

strolling outdoors. It was an artificial effect, the air in the room being perfectly

still, but I wondered whether the company had known how appealing I would

find it.

An image set into the wall showed the company's director, a bespectacled

man in a fawn suit. It was an old-fashioned picture of the two-

dimensional type,

but altered periodically to display different views of his face. Behind the glasses,

the director's eyes appeared extraordinarily dark, especially when a change in

the angle of the image seemed to turn him to stare straight at me. Those eyes

appeared alive with a peculiar fervour that I had noticed before in portraits of

historical figures, especially eminent scientists. Maybe it was simply a hunger for

knowledge, but in the director's eyes it seemed mixed up with something else:

something more unusual, which I could not for the moment identify.

The hologram halted in the middle of the office. Digital symbols were

weaving themselves into the air in front of her startlingly beautiful face, and she

peered into them.

'First permit me to confirm some personal details,' she said. 'Mr Thomas

Charrington. Nationality: European. Age: 18 years, two months and four days.

Life expectancy, extrapolating from current lifestyle trends: 82 years, eight

months and 19 days. Machine-assessed IQ on the Terman index: 137. Does that

all sound correct?'

'Yes, that's correct,' Tom replied. But he sounded disgusted with

himself, as I

had known he would.

‘A most impressive IQ,’ the hologram remarked. ‘Close to genius level. I must

say, we don’t see many like that.’ She turned to me. ‘And Miss Emily Rutherford.

Nationality: European. Age: 17 years, ten months and 12 days. Life expectancy,

extrapolating from current lifestyle trends: 89 years, one month and six days.

Machine-assessed IQ on the Terman index. .’

Here the hologram paused, and her brow furrowed prettily. She squinted into

the floating array of digital characters, and raised a slender hand to poke about

in them. The display of characters billowed like cigar smoke and then reformed,

but her puzzled expression remained.

‘This must be a data error,’ she said finally. ‘Forgive me, but are you quite

sure you’ve understood what’s meant by IQ, Miss Rutherford?’

‘I’m afraid so,’ I said. ‘It’s a conventional abbreviation of intelligence quotient.

A way of measuring individual cognitive potential, pioneered in the twentieth

century and perfected in the twenty-second. Technically, it’s a person’s mental

age divided by their chronological age, then multiplied by a hundred to

eliminate troublesome decimals. It’s assumed to be a normally

distributed

psychometric index with a standard deviation of 15. The average for all human

beings is a hundred by definition; the asymptotic ceiling is 200, after which the

necessary arithmetic ceases to be reliable.'

There was an uncomfortable pause.

'And what about yours, Miss Rutherford?' the hologram asked at last. 'You

read it correctly,' I said. 'One hundred and ninety-two.'

Her gaze shifted from me to Tom, and back to me again. As understanding

dawned, her beautiful blue eyes swelled with unfeigned sympathy.

'I'm so sorry,' she said. 'Now I see why you're here.'

'Naturally, there's no choice,' said Tom in the gentle, careful voice that he

would never have raised in anger. 'It's the one thing we can still do for each

other.'

'You've come to the right people,' said the hologram, placing one hand on my

shoulder and the other on Tom's. Synthetic solidity flooded through her fingers

long enough for her to give each of us a reassuring squeeze.

'All right,' I said. 'Tell us what you have to offer.'

'Very well,' said the hologram. 'I'm sure that with intellects like yours there'll

be no need for me to go over anything twice. Separation Day Incorporated was

established by the director a little over ten years ago, in order to fill a previously

unoccupied niche in emotional counselling provision. As the friend who referred

you to us may have explained, our service is rather specialised. It applies only in

cases such as your own, when two people are forced by circumstances to

separate against the will of both.'

My eyes strayed to the glittering star-field outside the window. I saw my face

reflected in the window, floating palely against the blackness of space: an

unquestionably plain and podgy face, with a rather sallow complexion. I didn't

find it hard to look away.

'Not all of our clients are lovers, like yourselves,' the hologram said. 'On

various occasions we have catered for platonic friends, for siblings, even for

colleagues. But always there are just two people, and always the parting is both

unwelcome and inescapable. In each case we provide closure by ensuring

symmetry. Our philosophy is that life events seem complete only if they finish in

exactly the same way that they start. For a surprisingly competitive fee, we will

generate the perfect setting in which the two of you can say your

unavoidable

goodbye: we will rebuild the environment in which you first met, just as it was

one year, six months and 13 days ago. Drawing on contemporary three-

dimensional recordings we will reconstruct it, molecule by molecule, in one of

the currently empty chambers located elsewhere in this station.'

'So it's true you can do it?' Tom asked.

'I know what you're thinking,' the hologram said. 'Why not just go back to

the scene of your first meeting without professional support? Why do you need

our services at all? But an informal return would never be satisfactory. How

could you ensure that everything was the same? The time of day, the

temperature, the ambient noise, the distribution of dust on every surface, the

paths of the insects as they move through the air — we reconstruct *everything*,

down to an atomic level of detail. Only in this way can it be guaranteed that all

the emotional responses from your original encounter will be perfectly

duplicated. And in answer to your question, Mr Charrington, please don't doubt

that we can do it. We can give you back the library, just as it was on that first

special day. Just the two of you, and 92,313 books. There has never been a place

or time in the history of the universe when small details have

mattered more

than they do to us.'

At the mention of the word 'library' I already felt transported back there. It

has always struck me as an extraordinary place — magical, you might say — a

single immense circular chamber containing one of only four non-digital fiction

libraries remaining in Europe. Its centrepiece is a marble reproduction of the

nineteenth-century statue 'the Kiss', three metres tall and therefore considerably

larger than Rodin's original, mounted on a broad circular plinth. Dozens of long

wooden bookcases radiate from it like the spokes of a wheel, and polished

reading tables are positioned between them. Sunlight slants in through the vast

mullioned windows spanning floor to ceiling, and high above is the vaulted arch,

elaborately decorated in sky-blue and gold. But what really fixes the atmosphere

of the library, creating a deeper impression than any of its visual elements, is the

pervasive scent of all those thousands of books: the smell of paper and dust and

leather, a smell inextricably bound up with an impression of scholarly authority,

a smell to make you nostalgic, I suppose, for the less hectic phases of

your life.

I had felt drawn to the library many times since early childhood, and the day

I met Tom began like many others. I was seated at a table, believing myself alone

in the building, and slowly leafing through a leather-bound edition of Jane

Austen's *Pride and Prejudice,* when I gradually became aware of the presence of

another person just in front of me. Austen had had her purifying effect, and my

mind was ready to work quickly. My eyes cannot have taken more than a second

to travel up Tom's body to his face, but before my gaze reached it I had already

discerned from his clothing that he was male, and I automatically tensed, ready

for the usual chastening experience of making a fool of myself. But when I saw

his face, as shamelessly handsome as the youthful hero of a Greek painting, my

nerves subsided again. If he had been only ordinarily attractive, I would have

fretted about making the right impression, about not saying the thing that would

drive him away or make him laugh at me. As it was, his physical appearance put

him so unambiguously beyond my reach that I immediately abandoned any

hope of impressing him, so that for once I was able to relax.

We introduced ourselves, and having established that I was a regular

patron

of the library, he was keen to ask me all about it. His visit, it appeared, had been

inspired by the library's sheer novelty value: he had been wondering what it

would be like to read from a page instead of a screen. He had already noted the

tides of some of the books on his way to my table, and was fascinated to learn

that I had not only heard of all the books, but had read most of them. He was

keen to do more reading, and sought my recommendations. Watching his face

carefully for signs of boredom, I described some of my favourites, a selection of

literary classics spanning 500 years from the eighteenth century onwards.

Miraculously, he seemed to find me interesting: he was so attentive I felt sure

that at any moment he would roll up his sleeve and start typing notes. By the

time I suggested that we go and have a cup of coffee together, I felt as remote

from myself as if I had been transformed into one of Austen's heroines. I did not

feel afraid when I asked to see him again: I was simply an actress speaking the

requisite lines. He said yes; that was the first day.

'How would you feel about one week from today?' the hologram said. She

had been speaking for the whole time that my mind had been

elsewhere.

‘I’m sorry?’ I said.

‘Your Separation Day. If it’s agreeable to you both, I can schedule it for one

week from today.’

While my mind had been in the library, I had managed to forget that the

interview was even happening. Dragged back to reality, I was suddenly assailed

by a wave of misery so intense that for a moment I thought it would make me

cry out. But Tom took hold of my hand.

‘One week from today,’ he said, sighing, replying for both of us.

‘And this will be the cost,’ the hologram said. Blushing slightly at the

obligatory reference to money, she deftly gestured a row of digits into the air.

Tom and I stared at the numbers. The price of our separation — the financial

price, that is — had so far scarcely entered our thoughts. Since enlisting the

company’s services seemed the right thing to do, we were naturally willing to

settle any bill without discussion. But this was something unexpected. The

company would have to draw upon the latest technological wizardry to recreate

the library from its component atoms upwards, and by no stretch of the

imagination could this figure possibly cover their costs.

‘That’s unbelievable,’ Tom could not resist saying. ‘How can you do it so

cheaply?’

‘Don’t worry about a thing,’ the hologram said. ‘We’ll do a beautiful job for

you. It’s our guarantee.’

It’s extraordinary how clearly this whole story comes back to me, now that I

have made up my mind to tell it. The passage of time since these events took

place has not faded the memories at all.

The seven days that Tom and I spent between our initial interview and our

Separation Day return to my mind with particular vividness, because never

before or since have I experienced pain of that kind. I suppose it is only in the

depths of despair, when it is a struggle to make it from one breath to the next

without screaming, that you truly realise the futility of all those platitudes from

well- meaning friends, the ones who want to convince you that time is the great

healer and that one day you’ll surprise yourself by waking up and finding that

you’re happy again. When you feel as if only cowardice is keeping you from

suicide, you are unlikely to be soothed by remarks of that nature. I didn’t want to

leave Tom; Tom didn't want to leave me; but we had no choice but to part, and

that was the horror of it.

After we had separated I could go through my whole life trying to replace

him, and the curious thing was that when people told me I would eventually

find somebody else, I believed them. Even without Tom, I did not expect to be

alone for ever; I had no doubt that one day I would find my second-best, and

settle for him in a philosophical spirit. That was what I had to commit myself to:

to spend the rest of my life striving to find something less good than the thing I

was now giving up. The desolation of facing that prospect, recognising the

stupidity of it, while clinging to every precious minute with Tom as the days

ebbed away, was a deeper nightmare than I can convey.

Lying in his arms each night of that final week, I pictured the inexorable

process of regrowth that would be taking place in the space station, as Separation

Day Incorporated's artificially intelligent mainframe painstakingly moulded a

perfect duplicate of the library out of a sea of raw molecules. I have no idea what

such a process actually looks like, but I know how it appeared in my mind:

shelves and chairs and tables coalescing in slow motion out of a whirl

of

fluorescent particles, dragging themselves creaking into the appropriate right

angles; books sliding into existence on the shelves, the leather bindings slipping

from the air to enfold them, ink sprinkling across blank pages. I wondered how

the two embracing lovers of Rodin's statue would look, blossoming up out of

nothing to solidify in the air, and whether the mainframe would feel any pride in

its artistry as it locked them into their eternal kiss.

But three days turn into two very quickly when you don't want them to, and

48 hours quickly become 24, and soon our Separation Day arrived.

Before we left Earth for the station, we did our best to match the company's

attention to detail. We dressed in the same clothes we had been wearing when

we first met, and we made sure our hair was just right. We even recalled that

Tom had had a suntan on the day of our first meeting and, although it was now

winter, he restored it artificially.

As our shuttle docked with the station, the sympathetic voice of the hologram

seeped in through the walls of our cabin, priming us for our part in the ritual. We

would be transported from the shuttle into the reconstructed library by matter

transposition; no one would accompany us there; no one would observe us as we

uttered our last goodbye in the strictest privacy. As on our first day, we would be

alone in the library. When it was over, only when we were ready, we would be

flown back to Earth in luxury. For the return trip there would be two shuttles, of

course: our separate journeys would have begun.

Matter transposition is an expensive way to travel, and at that time I had

experienced it only once before. The sensation is curious: it is as though you feel

a ghost of yourself going on ahead of you, then a moment later your flesh catches

up and inhabits it. Tom and I were transported simultaneously into the duplicate

library, and as the sensation of queasiness subsided we looked around to see

whether the company had kept its promises.

It was astonishing. Naturally, they had reconstructed every object in the great

circular room, from the towering Rodin sculpture at its centre to the most

insignificant item on the shelves; but that was only the beginning. As I wandered

among the shelves I saw that they had faithfully reproduced every spot and

blemish on every spine; some of the books, by design, were placed

upside down;

some were wedged with apparent carelessness between others, not touching the

shelf beneath them. Nothing had escaped the company's attention: the minutest

detail had been jealously scrutinised and pedantically reproduced. But that was

not the real achievement. As the hologram had promised, they had succeeded in

capturing the very flavour of the air. The temperature, the evocative scents of

paper and leather bindings, the patterns of light on every surface, the drifting

motes of dust, even the digitally programmed flight paths of the moths had

something unquestionably right about them, so that although I may not have

been consciously aware of all these details 18 months earlier, each of them

contributed something to the perfection of the experience now.

And, of course, it was agony. I think Tom and I realised at almost exactly the

same moment that we had made a terrible mistake. 'Life events seem complete

only if they finish in exactly the same way that they start,' the hologram had

argued. But as I looked around me and considered what Tom and I were about

to do, I began to wonder for the first time how the company could possibly

believe that maximising the emotional intensity of a difficult farewell

could be a

good idea.

‘We’d better find your table,’ Tom said hoarsely.

We moved hand in hand between the shelves, breathing the warm sweet

scent of dust and paper, towards the table where my copy of *Pride and Prejudice*

would be waiting. We were almost there when Tom touched my arm and turned

me gently to face him.

‘Do you think you can go through with it?’ he asked, looking earnestly into

my Ayes.

‘Do you?’

‘Well, we’ve no choice, have we?’ he said. ‘We can’t change our minds.’

‘No,’ I said. ‘We can’t change our minds. We’ve talked about it for so long.

We can’t live an impossible life, can we? If there were an alternative we’d have

thought of it.’

He kissed me for a long time, and when he moved his face away I saw there

were tears in his eyes. But he managed to say, ‘Well, you can tell me about Jane

Austen one more time.’

The leather-bound edition of *Pride and Prejudice* was lying open at the

right

page. We moved to the table to examine it together, leaned over the yellowing

pages and looked.

Tom sniffed, peering at the book. ‘Did they. .’ he began cautiously, then his

voice trailed away.

I think he was about to ask me whether the company could have overlooked

something, but already the sight of the book had turned me cold. Even before I

looked closely at the text, I felt obscurely menaced by its artificially regular

appearance. Something had gone wrong with Austen’s masterpiece: a curiously

systematic violence had been done to it. I moved my fingertips hesitantly over

the brittle yellow paper, carefully reading the words:

‘Collision! Collision! Collision! Collision! Collision! Collision! Collision!

Collision!’

Tom was as unsettled as I was, but he managed to regain his composure first.

‘I bet I can guess how it ends,’ he said.

But I felt hypnotised. I was still reading:

‘Collision! Collision! Collision! Collision! Collision! Collision! Collision!

Collision!’

I managed to break the spell by a conscious effort, and looked up.

Another

nearby table swam into focus. A large hard-backed book lay open there as well. I

moved to it as if in a dream.

‘Tom,’ I said. ‘Have a look at this.’

On the opened pages of this book there were no words at all, just an etching.

It depicted a cross-section of a planet, with a vast and hideous creature coiled at

its core. I closed the volume very slowly, but despite my care the noise as it

slammed shut echoed startlingly around the library. I examined the spine of the

book. No author was referred to, but the title, embossed in gold lettering, read

simply: ‘We’re coming!’

‘Something’s gone wrong,’ I said.

A moth, weaving its way between us, abruptly popped and vanished in a tiny

flicker of light. Tom and I stared in bemusement at the point in the air from

which it had disappeared.

A ponderous creaking sounded behind us, and we turned together to look.

Something was happening to one of the enormous wooden bookcases extending

from the middle of the library to its circumference: ripples were passing

rhythmically through the wooden shelving, as if we were viewing it through a

heat haze. But the movement was not an illusion, because with each ripple the

books shifted and wobbled on the shelves, destabilised by the waves of

distortion in the wood.

Dust was shaken from the upper shelves in improbable quantities, sifting

down on to the books below. Presently, a vast and ancient tome tumbled from

the highest shelf, and when it struck the floor it ruptured in a cloud of dust and

scraps of paper, disintegrating so completely that a moment later no trace of it

remained.

'It's getting darker,' Tom said. I raised my eyes and saw that it was true: the

sky- blue of the vaulted ceiling was darkening, as if night were falling in the

library. But not even that was the worst: the worst was the increasingly insistent

creaking from the direction of the enormous Rodin sculpture. I did not dare to

look at the embracing marble couple; there was too great a risk that their posture

would have changed.

'Someone's eye for detail is starting to look questionable,' Tom remarked as

we surveyed our destabilising environment.

‘They promised us we wouldn’t be watched,’ I said. ‘We were told we’d have

complete privacy. No one’s coming to help us.’

Now there was a new noise, adding itself to the discordant symphony of the

rest: an electronic bleeping, increasingly submerged beneath a rhythmic grinding

scrape. A patch of light appeared in the air, faded, then pulsed back more

strongly, while beneath it a bulky blue shape began to form. As the grinding

reached a crescendo the shape resolved itself into an upright blue box, its edges

hardening, its defining lines sharpening, solidity flooding through it, until with a

terminal crunch the noise of its arrival abruptly ceased.

As we stared at the box, voices became audible from within it: one male and

one female. Then one of the front doors folded inwards, and the owners of the

voices cautiously emerged. They were as surreal as anything we had seen so far:

they might have been characters from a period novel, perhaps even one of my

favourites. One of them was a very pretty dark-haired girl in her mid-twenties,

wearing a leather jacket in a style unseen since the twenty-first century. The

other was a tall aristocratic-looking man, apparently in his mid-fifties, with

flamboyantly styled white hair. He was dressed in fashions even more

antiquated than those of his companion, unashamedly eccentric in his ruffled

white shirt, black bow tie and green velvet jacket. Looking back now, the most

curious thing was that before the two visitors even said anything, their very

presence — especially the man's — made me feel that perhaps everything could

still be all right. It is hard to say what it was about their appearance that had that

effect on me; nevertheless the effect was very strong.

For a while the couple gazed around their increasingly unstable

surroundings.

The girl was wide-eyed with astonishment, while the man was more pensive,

stroking his chin as if thoughtfully assessing the extent of the problem. Then,

suddenly remembering his manners, he stepped forward, took my hand and

kissed it. At this unforeseen piece of gallantry I felt more disconcerted than ever,

but the man's smile was so delightful that I had to smile back.

'How do you do?' he said softly, enunciating the words with aristocratic

precision. 'Miss Rutherford, I imagine. A pleasure to meet you. I'm the Doctor.'

'I'm Emily,' I said. At his use of the archaic word 'doctor', I was reminded of

a book I had read when I was three years old. Beneath a picture of a kindly

looking man had been the sentence: ‘When you’re feeling bad, the doctor makes

it better.’ I hadn’t thought of that book in 14 years.

The Doctor turned to Tom and shook his hand.

‘And Mr Charrington. Sorry to butt in, old chap. But delighted to meet you,

all the same. It’s a relief to have got here, I must say.’

‘I’m Tom,’ Tom told him.

Meanwhile the girl had been left behind at the door of the blue box. ‘Ahem!’

she said emphatically, impatient to be introduced.

‘Forgive me,’ said the Doctor. ‘This is my assistant, Miss Smith.’

‘Sarah,’ she corrected, smiling cheerfully. ‘Hello. It’s quite a place you’ve got

here.’

‘Yes, well,’ the Doctor mused, thoughtfully observing the rippling of the

shelves. ‘You seem to have a few problems. I suppose it was to be expected —

still, a most unusual effect.’

‘I don’t like the look of that statue,’ Sarah remarked. I saw what she meant:

the white marble surface of the embracing figures was crawling with unnatural

patterns of light.

‘Are you from the company?’ Tom asked.

‘Company? Good gracious, no. We’re just.. tourists. But we do have a good

reason for being here. A mission of mercy, you might say.’

‘Where are we, Doctor?’ Sarah asked.

‘Well, since this charming young lady and gentleman are who I hoped they

would be, I imagine we’re in the anterior chamber of a space station in

geostationary orbit over Neptune.’

‘That’s right,’ I said. ‘It’s a library— I mean, a copy of a library. Do you know

why it’s collapsing?’

‘Yes, my dear,’ said the Doctor gravely. ‘I rather suspect I do.’

‘How do you know our names?’ Tom asked.

‘A friend of mine told me whom to expect,’ said the Doctor. ‘You’re here to

say goodbye, aren’t you?’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘We’re here to say goodbye.’

‘Well, then, things are quite simple. You mustn’t.’

‘But we have to,’ I said.

I became conscious that Tom and I were holding hands, and Sarah, in

consequence, looked puzzled.

‘ *Why* do you have to?’ she asked. ‘You seem to be getting on all right.’

‘IQ,’ said Tom gravely.

‘But what’s your intelligence got to do with it?’ Sarah asked.

‘Isn’t it obvious?’ Tom said. ‘You know how this government thinks. Our IQs

are too far apart. They differ by more than fifty points, and that's the maximum

permitted disparity. Ever since Emily and I became a couple, our lives have

deliberately been made difficult in a hundred different ways. Already it's

impossible for us to get work, other than the most menial that you could

imagine. If we're still discovered to be together after the age of twenty, our work

permits will be withdrawn altogether. There are all kinds of social services we're

already denied access to, and it's getting worse all the time. We won't ever be

allowed to marry, or to live in the same place. If we have children they'll be

regarded as genetically disadvantaged by the discrepancy in their parents'

intelligence, and schools will refuse to accept them. If we become ill, hospitals

may withhold treatment. As far as the authorities are concerned, we've opted out

of normal society. We don't pay our taxes, because we aren't allowed to.'

'But that's terrible!' Sarah said, with such simple force that I felt as if I were

recognising the unfairness of our predicament for the first time.

Tor a long time we were defiant,' I said. 'Now I'm afraid we've given in. We

can't carry on, so we've come here to say goodbye properly.'

'But there has to be something you can do!' Sarah exclaimed. 'Anything's

better than just giving up. Can't you meet each other in private?'

'There is no privacy any more,' Tom said. 'You must know that. Everything is

recorded, everywhere, all the time. The government values knowledge above

everything else. That's how the company was able to reconstruct this library.'

'But I don't understand,' Sarah said. 'Which of you has the higher IQ?'

'I have,' I said.

'Well, why didn't you just deliberately do worse on the test?'

'Because I didn't know I'd have to,' I said. 'My IQ was assessed before I met

Tom, and so was his. The figures are assumed not to change with age, so we're

stuck with them.'

'I'm terribly sorry,' said the Doctor gently. 'But I can only say to you again:

the two of you *must* change your minds.'

'But if you aren't from the company,' I said, 'why should our separation

matter to you at all?'

'In a very short while, Miss Rutherford,' the Doctor replied, 'it'll matter to

everyone.'

'It's getting darker,' Sarah said. 'What's going on here?'

‘Don’t touch anything, Sarah,’ warned the Doctor. ‘If you do, you could be

drawn into the instability. Stay close to the TARDIS: her presence may help to

damp down the nearby molecular disruption. Miss Rutherford, Mr Charrington,

you do the same.’

‘TARDIS’ apparently meant the blue box, so the four of us huddled

obediently round it.

Tom pressed the palm of his hand warily against the battered surface of the

box. ‘It’s vibrating,’ he said nervously. ‘It feels like it’s alive.’

‘Don’t worry,’ said the Doctor. ‘That’s not part of what’s happening here. It’s

perfectly normal, she does that all the time.’

‘What is happening here, Doctor?’ I asked.

‘You must let me come to that in my own time, my dear. Now listen very

carefully.’

But now we all had something else to listen to: a hideous brittle cracking from

he direction of the Rodin sculpture. We turned to look, just as the heads of the

lovers broke free from their kiss and swivelled slowly to regard us with blank

baleful eyes. The two mouths, formerly melded in a single sweep of marble, now

gaped raggedly. The man's right hand broke free of his partner, leaving a gaping

bloodless wound at her hip. Already the two figures were straining to stand;

only the circular plinth, which formed a solid piece with the statue, prevented

them from rising and heading straight towards us. Sarah clapped a hand over

her mouth to suppress a scream.

'Are we going to die, Doctor?' I asked.

'I'm afraid it's much worse than that, Miss Rutherford. But that plinth should

hold them for a while yet. Let's use the time wisely.'

'In the place where I come from,' the Doctor said, 'everybody knows

everybody else. Not just from the outside — from the inside. The minds of all my

people are connected. Now there's one particular fellow whose judgement I

thoroughly respect. A very old man, who spent half his life sitting under a tree

behind the house where I lived as a little boy. He's been speaking to me for the

past few days — inside my mind, you see. He warned me to find you, and stop

you.'

'Stop us from separating?' I asked.

'Yes, that's right,' said the Doctor. 'Because that old man has seen exactly

what happens if you do. He's shown me everything.'

‘But what possible difference could our parting make to anybody else?’ I

asked.

‘You separate today, Miss Rutherford,’ the Doctor said, ‘and then you remain

alone for 12 years. Some of your friends believe you will never fully recover from

the trauma of losing your dear Mr Charrington here. But after 12 years, you

finally meet someone new: a Mr Housman, a cellular technician. He asks you

repeatedly to marry him, and eventually, because you’re so lonely, you agree.

After two years of marriage you give birth to a son. You call him Daniel.’

The Doctor’s refined, dignified voice was becoming hypnotic. High above us,

the artificial sky of the ceiling was still darkening, casting deeper and deeper

shadows over his face as he spoke.

‘Naturally Daniel exists only because you marry someone other than Mr

Charrington,’ the Doctor said. ‘But the point is that he grows up to be an

insufferable bully. When he goes to college, I’m sorry to say, he victimises

another student so comprehensively that that boy takes his own life. As a result

the chief lecturer of the college, Professor Henderson, becomes disillusioned with

academia and hands in his resignation. He therefore fails to meet

Professor

Mirsky, who joins the college staff three years later, and they never have the

opportunity to collaborate in research.'

All around us, the vast bookcases were rippling and disgorging books.

Everything in the library appeared to be straining towards its own dissolution;

the marble lovers were writhing incessantly in their efforts to detach themselves

from their plinth. The only oasis of stability in the entire room was this bizarre

blue box, the TARDIS, the one object which had no right to be there. In response

to this, we huddled all the more closely around it.

'Without Henderson's restraining influence, Mirsky devotes his considerable

intellect to munitions research,' the Doctor said. 'After almost a decade his work

culminates in the development of Close Gas, a weapon so unspeakable that no

government in the world will admit to using it. But it is openly used by a

Scandinavian terrorist organisation, with the loss of over 200 lives in a primary

school in South Africa. The father of one of the children who dies in the massacre

has underworld connections, and he manages to arrange the destruction of the

European factory producing the gas. After that, things get worse very quickly.'

I looked at Tom and Sarah, who seemed as hypnotised by the Doctor as I was.

'When the munitions factory is destroyed, the development of many other

weapons systems is delayed by several years. Foreign Alliance powers take

advantage of Europe's vulnerability and choose their moment to invade. A

powerful Chinese corporation decides to protect its interests in the West by

stepping in and wiping out the forces occupying Europe. Shortly afterwards a

still larger corporation, based in Australasia, becomes fearful of the growing

power of its rival. The two corporations go to war. Every nation on Earth is

drawn into the conflict.'

Beneath our feet, the wooden floor was beginning to undulate. Ordinarily it

would have been polished to a reflective glow, but I did not dare look down

now; I was too frightened of what I might see.

'There are billions of deaths,' the Doctor said. 'But perhaps the most

regrettable of all are those of two visiting diplomatic envoys, aliens of the Vorlat

species, in an exchange of missile fire. The Vorlat are a benevolent people, but

their culture makes no distinction between accidental killing and assassination,

and soon they are drawn into the conflict on Earth. Unlike humans, they are

unskilled in the arts of war, and are quickly obliterated. They are therefore not

present to act as mediators when, four decades later, interplanetary conflict

breaks out between two highly aggressive military species, the Malorians and the

Vulzene.'

Here, the Doctor paused for a moment, frowning as if steeling himself to

deliver the worst.

'With nothing to restrain the space war, it gains irresistible momentum, and

more and more planets are dragged into it. Finally it spreads to affect the

Stratocracy of Jesh. Now the Jesh take war so seriously that they make most other

military species look like children playing at soldiers. Since their involvement

threatens the stability of the whole galaxy, a family of very ancient and powerful

creatures, the Shandance, attempts to intervene. By your understanding, the

Shandance might as well be gods. Soon other primordial beings, the Jatiri, vast

monsters who dwell for millions of years coiled up in planetary cores, wake up

and confront the Shandance. From that moment, it's a war of gods that draws in

everyone, everyone in the universe. The last terrible battle is known as

the

Collision. At least that's what it's called for the one day that it rages, because

after the Collision there are no historians left to tell the story. In fact there's no

one left at all — anywhere.'

I stared at the Doctor. As the seconds passed it became clear he had finished

his story, and the expression on his face confirmed that he had meant every

word. Tom and Sarah were gazing at him too, and the horror-struck expression

on Sarah's face suggested he had told her very little before arriving at the station.

I suppose I should have been terrified, but what I felt instead was a cold flood of

despair, far worse than terror.

'But what about all the disruption?' Tom said. 'Why is everything in here

coming apart?'

'Reality is expressing its anxiety about the threatened future,' said the Doctor.

'It's communicating with you in the only way it can, trying to warn you of the

consequences of your actions. Look at the sculpture.'

'Of course,' I said. 'How could I have been so slow? When the lovers separate,

the results are hideous. It's a message, isn't it?'

‘Why didn’t you tell me?’ Sarah said.

‘Because there was always a risk that we wouldn’t get here,’ the Doctor said.

‘The TARDIS is — well, not entirely reliable, as you know.’ He sniffed self-

consciously, perhaps slightly embarrassed at his decision not to be open with her

earlier. ‘And, well, there didn’t seem to be any point in telling you about a

disaster that we might not be able to stop.’

‘But this isn’t just any old disaster,’ Sarah protested. ‘You’re talking about the

end of *everything*.’

‘Yes, Sarah, I’m afraid I am.’

Meanwhile my mind was racing. ‘I can’t believe it works like that,’ I said.

‘Like what?’

‘Like dominoes falling. I mean, it’s nonsense — isn’t it? Causality can’t be so

fragile.’

‘But don’t you see, “fragile” is precisely the right word,’ the Doctor said. I

saw in his eyes that he was desperate to convince me of what he was saying; yet,

even now, his voice remained gentle and elegantly modulated, his scrupulous

courtesy still not compromised, even by his fear.

‘Have you ever stopped to reflect on the improbability of your own

existence?’ the Doctor asked. ‘Have you ever thought how much more

likely it

would have been for you never to have been born? Think about your parents,

and your grandparents, and all your ancestors before them, stretching back

through human history. And even before them, before the evolution of *Homo*

sapiens, still more ancestors, not even of your own species, but mammals,

reptiles, fish — all linked directly to you by blood, receding into remotest

prehistory. That makes millions of couples. If any one of them had failed to meet

for any reason at all, if anything had prevented them from having offspring, if

any one of those offspring had not survived — then you wouldn't be here now,

and you wouldn't even know that you had failed to exist. Your whole life has

been hanging on the thinnest of threads, Miss Rutherford. The odds against you

ever existing are trillions upon trillions to one. That's why your life is so

precious. That's why everybody's is.'

'But that's just philosophy,' I said. 'It's metaphysics. I thought—'

'You thought it was just an idea, and didn't correspond to anything real?

That's a natural mistake, but it's a serious one. Every one of your ancestors had

the absolute power of life and death over you. Simply by failing to reproduce,

they could have deleted you from history. And in just the same way, everyone

currently alive has limitless power over the generations to come. All those

potential lives depend on your most trivial decisions. Nothing you do is

inconsequential. Whom you meet and whom you don't, whether you decide to

love someone or walk away from them, whether you choose to turn right or left

at a fork in the road — every moment you are shaping history, implicitly

deciding for billions of potential people whether or not they ever experience

existence. You see, Miss Rutherford, from the perspective of humans in the

future, everyone currently alive is a god — and a frighteningly capricious god at

that. Even if you don't have children of your own, your influence over the future

is scarcely diminished. You make an indelible mark on history just by causing

the meeting of two people who do have children.' I thought of my dear friend

Julia, as beautiful and elegant as I never was, who met her fiancé only because I

introduced her to him. At the time I had been proud of that piece of

matchmaking; now I only shuddered.

'But the philosophical works I've read have always assumed that

causality

finds ways to repair itself,' I said. 'According to Syme's predictions, a universe

that is sufficiently robust to have developed in the first place should have self-

regulatory mechanisms to circumscribe the influence of any one person, so that

major cosmic events always happen on schedule regardless of how individuals

choose to behave.'

'Some of the time that's true,' the Doctor said. 'But not this time. Your

separation establishes a causal sequence with its own momentum. Today is the

last opportunity to stop it.'

'But isn't it irresponsible to interfere at all?' asked Sarah. 'Even if you do

persuade Tom and Emily here to stay together — well, according to what you

said, won't you be wiping out millions 'of people who only exist if they split up?'

'I've thought about that, Sarah. But if Tom and Emily separate, in a very short

while there won't be anyone at all. I must trust my mentor's predictions.'

'And can you?'

'I have to. Chaos theory assumes that causality is fundamentally

unpredictable, but that's a fallacy. Time Lord arithmetic is equal to it.' He turned

to Tom and me.

‘Well,’ he said, ‘it’s your decision. I can’t make it for you. Will you stay

together?’ Tom and I turned to look at each other. Finally I said what we were

both thinking.

‘I’m sorry, Doctor,’ I replied. just don’t see how we can. But I promise you,

it’ll all be all right. If I ever meet a man called Housman, I won’t marry him. I

won’t even speak to him.’

The Doctor shook his head with a wry little smile that indicated he had

expected exactly that reply. ‘But you will, my dear,’ he said. ‘You’ll forget that

you ever believed me — and one way or another, you *will*.’

As I said earlier, it’s astonishing how vividly all these events come back to my

mind; describing them is proving easier than I expected. But now I come to the

difficult part, the part that I still have nightmares about. It’s a horrible thing I

have to relate — insupportably horrible, I felt at the time — but I must tell it

anyway. As we stood by the TARDIS we heard the distinctive buzz of matter

transposition, and a human figure bloomed into existence nearby. It was a short,

middle-aged man in a fawn suit, with old-fashioned spectacles perched halfway

down his nose. I immediately recognised him, from the images on the wall of the

hologram's office, as the director of Separation Day Incorporated. The darkness

of his eyes was even more striking than it had been in the pictures: the irises

were almost as black as the pupils. He seemed distinctly uncomfortable as he

looked around, as if undecided which should disconcert him more, the

disintegration of the library or the unexpected presence of the Doctor and Sarah.

As might have been expected, he seemed especially disquieted by the sight of the

two violently squirming figures of the Rodin sculpture. His hands fluttered

nervously as he peered around him, taking in each unwelcome detail, his

expression alternating between anxiety and helpless disapproval.

'Local molecular disruption,' he gasped. 'And an alien intrusion,' he added,

his eyes settling on the Doctor and Sarah. 'Needed to come in person, and deal

with — I mean, it's hard to say which hurts more. It's all pain, isn't it?'

'What do you mean?' Tom asked.

'There's no law against it, is there?' asked the director, gazing beseechingly

around our little group, his black eyes urgently searching one face after another.

'You can break someone's heart any time you like. You can decide unilaterally to

end a relationship, but you can't decide unilaterally to maintain one. Not

amenable to logic, really.'

'What?' I said.

'I wanted to make sense for you,' jabbered the director. 'Man in suit's such an

easy role to play, should be. But it gets too much, and now all this surrealism. I

wish it would stop, it keeps me awake at night.'

I could make no sense of what he was saying. Sarah and I exchanged a look

that told me she was equally bemused. With no idea how to reply to the

director's gibberish, Tom simply reached out to steady his shoulder. The director

did not actually appear in danger of falling; it was a symbolic gesture, a vain

attempt to calm the man's racing mind.

The Doctor's response was different: he was staring at the director as if seeing

right through him. The two men's eyes met, and they held each other's gaze. It

was as if each recognised the other as something quite different from what his

appearance suggested.

'You must abandon this pretence, sir,' said the Doctor firmly. 'If I am to help

you, you must show us who you truly are.'

A shockingly loud sound came from the director. It seemed to issue not just

from his mouth but from his entire body, but it was unmistakably a howl of

relief. His posture abruptly changed, his upper body snapping wider as if his left

shoulder had explosively dislocated. Three of us stepped back simultaneously in

an involuntary reaction, but the Doctor did not flinch.

‘Come on, man!’ he urged. ‘It’s too late for deception. You must let go.’

A hideous metamorphosis was overtaking the director. His head was shaking

wildly, bouncing from one shoulder to the other in gyrations that looked violent

enough to break his neck. His entire body was shuddering, relinquishing its

fragile façade of humanity more openly with each second. The fluttering of his

fingers had accelerated to a blur; already there seemed to be more than five digits

on each of his hands. His torso was shifting and bloating into unnatural forms

inside his fawn suit, and I waited for the thin material to tear. But there was a

new surprise: the material had been part of him, and already patches of it were

running like liquid, melting into his rapidly greying skin.

I looked at the Doctor, who was confronting the director motionless and

unblinking, his hands on his hips. I reasoned that either he felt

nothing at all, or

that he was accustomed to monsters: his steadfast gaze never faltered.

Now the director was lurching and spinning in a kind of obscene dance.

Particles of organic matter were shaking free of the surface of his skin and

raining down his sides, but somehow they never fell clear of him: always they

were reabsorbed into the mass of his body and contributed to the continuing

transformation. His uncontrolled movements spun him momentarily to face me,

and I saw that his face was no longer even remotely human. The black eyes had

swelled monstrously: heavy with liquid, they bulged like an insect's eyes from

the diminishing surface of the scalp. The nose had deflated almost to the point of

disappearance, while the mouth had expanded into a gaping hole that looked fit

only for howling. Somewhere in the remote distance I became aware of Tom and

Sarah, as rigid with horror as I was; and underlying and permeating the whole

scene, the unwavering will of the Doctor, who had sought this transformation

because he alone could see that it was necessary.

The director's body was still deforming, warped by rivers of internal

movement. His disguise of clothing had completely vanished now, and his

mottled grey skin was a mass of wounds. Some of the wounds broke open with

harsh popping sounds, and I heard Sarah scream: now each wound was a

howling, gasping mouth to match the one that bisected the director's head.

'And that's the end of that!' the director yelled frantically. 'There's no going

back! Never see you again! Final farewell and my world gets worse! Where's the

humanity?'

Some of his shouts were starting to overlap, and I wondered whether they

were issuing from more than one of his mouths.

'Can't think about the future!' he screamed. 'Built it round you anyway!

Where's my friend going to be? It's not natural, you know! Not beautiful at all!'

A black limb wriggled free of the contorting mass of his body, flexing its

shiny black claw in the air. The Doctor took a pace forward and gently grasped

the claw, staring determinedly into what remained of the director's face.

'Now listen to me,' he said. 'The environment is destabilising, and you can

use that. If you take hold of part of it, you will be swept up in the instability and

destroyed. That's the only release possible for you now, but you must do it

quickly.'

One side of the director's face split open into a third eye, even larger than the

others, staring appealingly into the Doctor's face. A shutter of skin flitted briefly

over it, a remarkably human blink of confusion and dismay. 'When you're

feeling bad, the doctor makes it better,' I thought. 'The doctor has the power to

heal.'

'You can do it,' said the Doctor, and he released the creature's claw. 'You can

end the pain.'

The director may have nodded his understanding; his head was too

comprehensively deformed for us to be sure. Then he turned resolutely and

shambled towards the huge sculpture at the centre of the library, his shapeless

body still bloating as he moved. The two lovers were on the point of breaking

away from their restraining plinth: slivers of marble were spraying incessantly

from the base of the statue. The director extended tapering grey arms towards

the lovers at the exact moment that they succeeded in-tearing themselves free.

His arms quickly grew long enough to enfold both the man and the woman into

his embrace, and they swivelled their malformed marble faces to survey the

wretched creature between them.

Ripples of distortion washed from the statues into the director, and his body,

fractured and blasted apart in an eruption of organic fragments; the outrush of

air sounded like a vast sigh of relief. The explosion was powerful enough to take

the lovers with it: they shattered into a storm of white marble fragments. We

braced ourselves, waiting for the flying debris to cut into us. Instead the

explosion collapsed in on itself, all the fragments swiftly reabsorbed into the

destabilising environment.

'What *was* he?' Sarah cried.

'We don't have time for explanations now, Sarah,' said the Doctor, glancing

up at the blackening ceiling. He turned to us. 'Now, Miss Rutherford, Mr

Charrington. We don't have a great deal longer. I ask you again: will you stay

together?'

I took hold of Tom's hand. As we looked around the library, we could see

how right the Doctor was. Everywhere the bookcases were fracturing and caving

in; some of the books were spontaneously detonating in plumes of yellow dust,

as if tired of waiting to be released from their shelves. The wooden floor was

forming waves that threatened to throw us off our feet. Soon the environment

would no longer be able to withstand the tidal forces washing through it, and it

would wrench itself apart, leaving only four people and a peculiar blue box

tumbling around in a vacuum.

I looked at Tom, at his wonderful face, his beautiful gentle eyes. I

remembered the hologram's calculations of our life expectancies, and for a

moment, despite the turmoil on all sides, I had only one thought in my head.

Sixty-four years without him. What a waste of all that time.

'You woke me up,' I told him. 'No one else understands me. I love you.'

'You have to decide,' urged the Doctor.

'I love you too,' Tom said. 'But I don't know what to do.'

'You can change your mind,' Sarah said. 'It's *always* all right to change your

mind.'

'We can't live an impossible life,' I said, but I was ceasing to mean it.

Tom's expression became firm. 'I can't live without you,' he said. 'And I

won't.'

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I shifted my gaze from Tom to the Doctor.

'Well, Miss Rutherford,' he said coolly, and I sensed the desperate pride he

was taking in retaining his composure to the very last. ‘What are you going to

do?’ I looked at him and felt my head clearing, perhaps for the first time.

‘Not to save the library,’ I said. ‘Not to save the future. I just can’t live

without him.’

Tom’s arm was around me, and he pulled me protectively towards him. Over

his shoulder I could see what was left of the library. No shelves or books were

visible now, just a blizzard of swarming debris raging on every side. The black

sky of the ceiling was breaking up, releasing a flood of whirling fragments that

was swept up amongst the rest. We were at the eye of the hurricane now,

sheltered only by the proximity of the TARDIS. The roar of the library’s

destruction was deafening.

‘I’m changing my mind,’ I said, looking into the Doctor’s eyes.

All around there was still only chaos, a seething ocean of molecules turning

black.

‘Don’t look at *me*,’ yelled the Doctor over the howl of the storm. ‘Look at *him*.’

I turned to Tom.

‘I’m changing my mind,’ I told him.

He nodded. ‘Yes,’ he said. ‘So am I. I’m not losing you.’

Then came a silence so abrupt and complete that I wondered whether

anything at all existed outside Tom's embrace. But when I finally looked beyond

him, I saw that everything was back in place. All the features of the library had

snapped back into their proper positions in a moment: the walls, the shelves, the

Rodin sculpture. And when I stopped holding my breath, I could smell books.

A little while later, the four of us were seated at a reading table, the duplicate

of the one where I had first met Tom. I noticed that Jane Austen was once again

saying what she should.

'What happened to the director?' I asked. 'Why did he turn into that

creature?'

'He was always that creature,' the Doctor said. 'At least, as long as the

company has been in business. His human shape was just camouflage for the

benefit of clients. When he came in here, the trauma of what was happening, and

what I said to him, encouraged him to abandon his disguise.'

'But why was he in such an awful state?' Sarah asked.

'I can only guess at that,' the Doctor said. He turned to me. 'You say the

company arranged to reconstruct the place where you met? So that you could

say goodbye properly?'

'Yes, that's right.'

'Well,' said the Doctor, 'doesn't that seem rather a curious thing to

want to

do?'

'It felt wrong as soon as we arrived,' Tom said. 'It made the pain of separating

worse.'

'Precisely,' said the Doctor. 'That was always the intention. If you're already

suffering, the last thing you should do is the most *poignant* thing. "All farewells

should be sudden, when forever".'

'Pardon?' Sarah said.

'Lord Byron said that — well, actually I suggested it, and he rephrased it.

Nice chap, George. I got on with him famously.'

'So you mean the company was prolonging the agony deliberately?' I asked.

'Precisely,' the Doctor said. Their aim was to produce maximum distress in

their clients. My guess is that Separation Day Incorporated was a research project

from the beginning, no doubt funded by that unpleasant government you were

telling us about. I imagine they wanted to investigate human emotion, but they

would have needed *extremes* of emotion for it to work. What they chose to call

their director looked to me like a research organism — probably starting life as a

single biological cell engineered to gather data about human emotion, which the

company could analyse later.'

'So the creature grew as it learned,' I said. 'But in the end it must have

absorbed so much grief from the company's clients that it began to empathise

with them. That's something the company would never have foreseen. That's

why it was in such a desperate state — the poor thing must have been racked by

continuous psychological agony.'

'Indeed,' said the Doctor. 'All it had ever known were unbearable goodbyes.

Its misery would only have grown worse. Oblivion was the best that I could offer

it.' 'That's why the price was so low,' Tom said suddenly. 'The company didn't

want to put off any potential clients.'

'Yes, quite,' said the Doctor. 'But without their research organism, I think it's

safe to say the project is now concluded.'

'And the Collision?' I asked.

'That future won't happen now. The possibility was wiped out the moment

you changed your minds — or at least, the moment you both knew you meant it.

Once you made your choice the universe relaxed, and restored this delightful

library to its former state.'

‘You saved us,’ Tom said.

‘Oh, not a bit of it,’ the Doctor said, although he did look pleased with Tom’s

remark. ‘You did that yourselves. I’m just sorry I couldn’t be more persuasive in

encouraging you to stay together. There’s a reason why I couldn’t be, I’m afraid.’

Here he faltered, something I had not expected. Sarah looked at him

curiously.

‘Something happened to me a while ago,’ the Doctor said. ‘A short time

before I met you, Sarah, though I never discussed it with you. I lost somebody —

in a manner of speaking.’

‘Josephine,’ breathed Sarah. ‘The girl from UNIT’s staff. I heard about her.’

‘She found a wonderful relationship,’ said the Doctor, seeming to gaze

through us and beyond us. ‘A romance, just like yours, Miss Rutherford. It was

the best thing for her. But it cost me my best friend.’

I saw a little flutter of pain pass through Sarah’s eyes as the Doctor said this,

but he seemed not to notice.

‘So I confess I’ve been feeling, shall we say, *ambivalently* about human

romantic relationships, Miss Rutherford — even when they do no harm at all.’

Suddenly he appeared to collect himself, and got to his feet. ‘Well, I

suppose our

business here is concluded. I think we should take the two of you home. You can

visit the real library, to say a renewed hello.'

'There'll be a lot of opposition,' I remarked.

But Sarah smiled at us both. 'Oh, I think you can handle it,' she said.

And when I looked at Tom, I knew she was right.

That's my story. That's what happened on Separation Day: the first day of the

rest of our lives, as the saying goes. And curiously enough, Sarah's optimism was

vindicated more quickly than Tom and I could have hoped. In the end, we had to

endure only another five years of persecution, after which the government

toppled: rather spectacularly, it has to be said. Its more liberal successors

repealed the regulations relating to intellectual disparity between romantic

partners, along with a lot of other indefensible bureaucracy. That left us free to

marry, so we did. It was during that period that the culture of constant

surveillance was being jubilantly swept away throughout the whole of Europe.

The camera-smashing seemed to go on for months, until I thought that people

would never tire of it. There's nothing quite so intoxicating as reasserting your

liberty, I suppose.

And now all that is ancient history. It's amazing how quickly time passes,

and it only accelerates as you grow older. That's what prompted me to tell this

story: in honour of the anniversary, as it were, because Separation Day was

exactly fifty years ago today. I have no complaints or regrets about the life that

Tom and I have shared: it's been marvellously ordinary, which is more than I

could have dreamed of. We've had arguments, of course, but only about five or

six, and I don't think that's too bad in half a century together. Just being in his

company still makes me happy, and excited, and optimistic about the future. We

even had a wonderful son, whom we chose not to call Daniel. He grew into the

kindest man you could ever wish to meet.

As for the Doctor and Sarah, Tom and I have two competing theories. The

first is that we simply imagined them: for if the Collision was a genuine threat,

what more natural thing for the universe to do than to cause us to hallucinate

two angelic visitors, who would conveniently say *exactly* the right things to make

us stay together?

But the second theory is the one I like better: as ridiculous as it seems, I

believe they were real people, genuine travellers in time, who from

their

perspective may have left the station only five minutes ago. And because I

believe they exist, I have hopes for them. I hope the Doctor learns to leave

Josephine in the past, and move on to new things, just as she did. I hope Sarah

learns to cope with the fact that the Doctor used to have someone else at the

centre of his life. Most of all I hope that by preserving the future of the universe

they haven't left themselves with more work than they can handle; but then, no

doubt they'll be able to deal with the problems one at a time as they arise. If they

travel together for long enough, it's even possible that Sarah may become the

Doctor's new best friend. Perhaps he believes he'll never get over Josephine,

perhaps he doesn't even want to; but as Tom and I can testify, you can always

change your mind.

The Very Last Picture Show

Andrew Collins

An Adventure of the Fourth Doctor,

with Leela

The final time they came for her, it was a bitterly cold November night. Stars

spattered the velvet sky like neon dandruff on a vampire's lapel.

Pulling her coat closer about herself against a sudden squall, Connie Watson

walked purposefully along the moonlit street towards the 24-hour petrol station

on the main road. She was irritated. The minicab driver who had brought her

back from the gate-night classic' screening of *Casablanca* had been chatty to the

point of intrusive, and his cab had smelled of kebab. Worse still, he had mistaken

her for her neighbour Mrs Peartree, whose custom he then claimed, at length, to

prefer. In spite of this, Connie had over-tipped him. And just when she thought

she was settled in for the night — telly blaring and kettle on — she'd opened up

the fridge and realised she was out of milk.

A small fleshy woman with pouchy eyes and a fussily primped helmet of

lacquered grey hair, Connie Watson shivered as the wind picked up and the

branches overhead waved and rustled. She could probably do without tonight,

she thought as she trudged onward, but Chairman Meow would never forgive

her in the morning. A bowl of milk and a plate of ham was the chairman's

regular breakfast, and had been since he was a kitten, long before

Alfred had

died. The thought of her late husband brought a tear to her eye. She brushed it

away crossly, blamed the frosty night, and turned the corner.

Leaves danced round her feet as the wind persisted. She should have

wrapped up warmer, maybe worn a woolly hat. Aside from her, no other living

soul roamed the frosty street.

In the wake of another biting gust, the orange streetlamp above her suddenly

flickered and died. A second later, taking its cue, its neighbour also guttered and

fell dark. Then, all along the street, in uncanny succession, every streetlamp

faltered and failed as if they were birthday candles extinguished by a giant's

breath.

Connie shivered and looked to the sky. The stars were disappearing in a

spreading stain of black. Something was blotting out the night, something that

was descending rapidly and bringing with it a muffled shroud of silence. The

immense shape came closer, and details slowly emerged from shadow, eerily lit

by strobing red and green pinpricks around the shape's perimeter.

The flying saucer was huge and faintly glowed a mottled dull silver.

Concentric panelling rippled in an eye-twisting heat haze. It seemed to slow, and

in an instant it was noiselessly hanging directly overhead.

A central aperture irised open, and Connie was suffused in a sudden column

of hissing white light. She screwed her eyes tightly shut as the air erupted all

around her. Abruptly, the world was full of flying dust and leaves and litter and

twigs.

Connie coughed as dirt flew into her mouth. Enveloping her was a tornado of

stinging debris and autumn rot, and she felt herself being lifted off her feet.

‘Here we go again,’ she thought as she ascended into the light.

‘This is not the steaming jungle of Kentillion 12 in the first quarter of the

Millennium of the Zargobeast.’

‘What was that, Leela?’ The Doctor emerged from the TARDIS, jamming a

shapeless hat on to his unruly curls.

‘I said this is not the steaming jungle of Kentillion 12 in the firs—’

‘Yes, yes, I heard you, Leela, I heard you.’ The Doctor raised his hands in a

‘shushing’ gesture.

‘But that is where you said we would land, and that is not where we are,’

Leela persisted, gesturing into the smothering white void. ‘You have brought us

to the wrong place.'

'If this even is a place,' muttered the Doctor, peering at the surrounding

whiteness. The solid blue shape of the TARDIS behind them was a stark

intrusion into the empty space, which felt at once claustrophobic, yet fuzzily

infinite. A colourless mist seemed to hang heavily in the air. Even the ground

they walked upon seemed insubstantial and pale. He rallied. 'Very well spotted,

Leela. This certainly isn't a jungle. That's very perceptive of you.' Shoving his

hands into the pockets of his long brown coat, the Doctor strode forward several

paces before wheeling round to observe the deficiency of landscape with

narrowed eyes. Ignoring Leela's glower at his blatantly provocative

condescension, he sniffed the air, and then grinned broadly. 'Well.' He shrugged.

'You know what they say about the best laid plans of mice and men...'

Leela frowned. 'No, Doctor, I do not know what they say.'

The Doctor hesitated. 'No, I don't suppose you do,' he said, and fixed her

with a sombre look. 'They gang aft aglay, Leela.' He adjusted the coils of his

lengthy scarf and turned away.

From the corner of his eye, the Doctor watched his companion's response

with indulgent pride. She was a tall, lithe young woman, with a

cascade of

deepest brown hair, and healthily tanned skin stretched over finely toned

muscles. Her brown eyes shone with intelligence. The revealing animal-hide

warrior's garb she wore spoke of a far earthier and grounded existence than that

afforded by the ethereal blankness of their surroundings, yet he could already

see her assessing and adapting, evaluating the qualities of this new environment.

Or lack of environment. She really was quite extraordinary. And she hadn't even

felt the need yet to pull her knife.

Having given the Doctor's last comment some thought, Leela reached a

conclusion. 'Your words have no meaning,' she said.

'Well, of course they have a meaning,' he said imperiously. 'My words

always have a meaning. It means no matter how well you plan, things will often

go wrong.'

'So you have planned and things have gone wrong?'

'Exactly.' The Doctor beamed.

'And your plans often go wrong.'

'Well. .'

'And the Mice and the Men — these are the names of gangs?'

'Not quite.' The Doctor squinted thoughtfully into the distance. 'You

see,

“gang” is a Scottish transitive verb meaning “to go”.’

‘A transi...?’

‘You know, you ask altogether too many questions.’

‘What is “Scottish”?’

The Doctor gave her a pop-eyed stare. ‘Haggis, bagpipes, Robbie Burns, deep-

fried Mars bars. . Now, a question I would like answered is: do you see

something over there?’ He pointed.

Leela followed his gaze. ‘I_ I am not sure.’

‘I think I see something.’ The Doctor’s eyes narrowed. ‘Yes, I’m certain there’s

a structure of some sort. Let’s find out, shall we?’

‘Do you think that is where we will find the mice?’ Leela looked hopeful as

she trotted beside him.

‘Forget about the mice,’ the Doctor murmured.

They melted into the fog.

Three eyes on stalks wobbled as they observed a monitor screen. On the

screen, a tall, curly haired man and a slim woman were walking through

whiteness.

‘Who are they?’

‘Beg your pardon, Captain Grugvengler, sir?’

‘I said, “Who are they?” A stubby grey digit was thrust at the monitor.

‘They’re not part of the program.’

‘Couldn’t say, sir.’

Grugvengler’s three eyes narrowed in a frown.

‘I love you, darling.’

‘I love you too.’

‘I can’t bear that we should part.’

‘Oh, my dearest darling.’ The man’s voice, throbbing with emotion, boomed

around the auditorium from surround-sound speakers, while a warbling

orchestra underscored each over-enunciated syllable. ‘One day this terrible war

will be over, and we will be back in each other’s arms.’

Richard and Debbie nestled comfortably together in the dark. The plastic arm

between their seats was raised, and an immense bucket of popcorn balanced

between them. Richard’s hand rested on Debbie’s thigh. The thin bracelet at

Debbie’s wrist sparkled as she absently popped a handful of popcorn into

Richard’s mouth. He chewed slackly.

In front of them, the flickering silver light silhouetted rows of attentive heads,

while on the movie screen, giant black-and-white figures went about their

melodramatic business.

‘I wish, oh, *how* I wish you didn’t have to go.’ The woman’s eyes shone with

unshed tears, and the music swelled.

‘But I must, my sweet one, I must.’

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‘Oh, Trevor.’

‘Oh, Cynthia.’

‘Oh, Trevor!’

‘Oh, Cynthia!’ The man’s slick moustache glistened like a lovesick mollusc.

He hefted his backpack and turned to the steaming train, which whistled

despondently.

A flickering shadow skittered across the screen. For a brief moment, half the

picture was obscured, and then the shadow was gone.

The woman lunged at her beloved. ‘Kiss me, you wonderful heroic fool.’

They kissed. The entire string section went into gushing overdrive.

Richard absentmindedly plucked some popcorn from the tub and raised it to

Debbie’s mouth. She leaned forward and gobbled it distractedly.

A noise from behind them momentarily attracted Richard’s attention. It was a

loud chomping punctuated by slurps, noisy belches and the occasional

enthusiastic ‘yum’. He turned his head toward the source.

A couple of rows back, a shadowy figure moved. Richard squinted, his eyes

readjusting. The thing appeared to be a huge insect, the size of a Doberman, with

a pointed spiny body and busy mandibles. Its dark amber carapace

glimmered in

the cinema's gloom.

As it moved, the long antennae atop its head waggled in the beam from the

projector. It was nibbling on what remained of a waxen-faced man whose face

wore a frozen expression of bemusement. A ragged, bloody hole was all that was

left of the man's chest. One dead hand still clutched a bag of popcorn, which was

slowly spilling on to the floor.

As Richard watched, the creature's spiky head lifted, and it looked directly at

him through glowing compound eyes.

It raised a wickedly pincered foreleg and gave a cheery wave. 'Hello,' it said

in a scratchy voice. It seemed to consider for a moment, then it extended its other

pincer, in which was clutched a bloody human leg, complete with shoe.

'Yum?' it said hopefully.

Richard watched it for another second, and then turned back to the movie. He

crammed another fistful of popcorn into his mouth, the thin bracelet at his wrist

sparkling. Debbie snuggled closer.

After a moment, the crunching and slurping behind them recommenced.

It was an old brick building, standing in grand isolation amid the whiteness.

Large elaborate neon letters above the wide front doors proclaimed the cinema's

name: the Empire. Beneath this, in smaller black letters picked out against a

dusty white background, were the words 'Now Showing: *The Very Last Picture*

Show.'

'Now, why would there be a cinema in the middle of nowhere?' the Doctor

mused.

Leela and the Doctor approached curiously and climbed the steps to the

entrance. An empty ticket booth stood between the opaque glass doors. They

pushed the doors open and stepped through.

The foyer was richly draped and smelled of buttery fat. Posters and enlarged

motion-picture stills were dotted all around the walls. The burgundy flock

wallpaper dissolved into shadows as it approached the high ceiling.

'No one is here,' Leela said.

The Doctor strode over to the nearest framed posters and examined them

closely, peering with interest at the poster for *The Long Goodbye*. To his left, an

unmanned concession stand lined the back wall, coffee pots steaming cheerily,

glass display cases full of Poppets and Opal Fruits. Flanking it were

the heavy

doors into the auditorium, through which could be heard the muffled sounds of

a movie in progress.

‘They’re all watching the film.’

‘The mice...?’

‘More likely the men. I thought I told you to forget about the mice.’ He

stuffed his hat into a pocket. Then he breathed on the glass surface of another

poster, *A Farewell to Arms*, and lifted his scarf to polish it.

‘Why do they watch this film?’

‘For entertainment. Usually. For instruction, distraction. .’ The Doctor peered

at another picture frame where a teenage Uma Thurman was gazing from the

lurid advertisement for *Kiss Daddy Goodnight*. He pointed to the wall on his right.

‘ *The Goodbye Girl.. Farewell My Concubine.. Goodbye, Mr Chips... Au Revoir Les*

Enfants. I think I detect a theme.’ He grinned broadly. Leela, have I ever taken

you to the pictures?’ Before she could reply, the Doctor turned to the snack

counter and banged it with his palm.

‘Shop!’

Twin shafts of light sliced through the dark. They danced briefly like fireflies

on the backs of heads, and moved on.

At the rear of the auditorium, beneath the flickering rays of the projector,

stood two still figures, sweeping their narrow torch beams across the audience.

Each figure wore a white shirt, purple waistcoat and matching bow tie. The first

was a middle-aged woman in a black skirt, with a bleach-blonde perm and

clownish make-up. The nametag pinned to her ample bosom identified her as

'Betty'. The second — a pimply, greasy-haired youth — wore trousers at half-

mast to reveal grubby white socks. This, his nametag attested, was 'Liam'.

An instant before their beams came to rest on a slumped, gnawed-looking

head, a twitching shadow detached itself and dived into the gloom, surfing the

darkest edge of shadow at the border of the light.

Betty and Liam clicked off their torches and moved down the aisle.

They pushed their way along the row. The seats' occupants distractedly

shuffled to let them past, their eyes never leaving the flickering screen.

Reaching the body, Liam grabbed it under the armpits, and hoisted it easily.

Betty took what remained of the legs, and they hauled the carcass back along the

row toward the aisle, the dead man's neighbours once again shifting obligingly

to let them through.

Two rows in front, someone glanced incuriously back at the scene, and then

blandly returned his gaze to the movie screen. Liam and Betty manoeuvred the

body towards the ‘Staff Only’ door at the back.

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The movie played on.

‘Problems in the isolation area, Captain Grugvengler, sir.’

Grugvengler’s three eyes swivelled on their stalks to regard his deputy.

‘The ushers are reporting another loss, sir.’

‘Another? Now really, this is just getting out of hand.’ He considered for a

moment. ‘I’m probably going to have to go in there to sort this out.’

He remained sitting in his plush command chair, chubby fingers drumming

on the overstuffed arm.

The rear doors of the auditorium swung open and the Doctor and Leela

entered. No one had responded to his calls for service, so the Doctor had scooped

up a tub of popcorn, rummaged in his coat pocket, and dropped the gold

doubloon he found there on to the countertop. Then he had ushered Leela into

the cinema.

Leela shook the carton. ‘What is the purpose of this?’

‘You eat it.’

She sniffed the contents tentatively. ‘It is greasy,’ she said. The Doctor

encouraged her to keep her voice down as they found a pair of threadbare seats

together at the edge of a row near the front.

‘There are a lot of people,’ Leela observed in a loud whisper. She watched the

young couple nestling next to her as they stared up at the screen, chewing.

Tentatively, she dipped into her tub and sampled the contents. As she did so,

perceiving from her neighbours that this was the ritual, she dutifully watched

the antics onscreen. She chewed disappointedly. ‘It tastes of nothing,’ she said,

and took another handful. ‘It is bland and boring. Not like freshly cooked meat.’

‘I told you, the hot dogs weren’t fresh,’ muttered the Doctor, eyeing the

people around them thoughtfully.

Leela spoke through another mouthful. ‘It is tasteless and dull.’ She took

some more.

Amused, the Doctor watched her as she continued to shovel popcorn into her

face.

Within moments, Leela was watching the movie with rapt attention. The

Doctor himself found that he was tuning out, looking about him more and more,

at the oddly blank faces in the semi-lit gloom. The movie was fairly standard fare

— boy meets girl, boy and girl meet monster, monster meets city, and city meets

destruction. Judging by the prevailing theme of the posters in the foyer, it was

probably called something like *Goodbye, Tokyo*, the Doctor mused.

Something scuttled at the edge of his vision — black on black, more felt than

seen. He turned to look but there was only darkness.

The sense of disquiet that had settled on him as he stepped out of the TARDIS

was growing. Perhaps it was the strangely subdued audience. Perhaps it was his

irritation with the movie itself, or the relentless booming of the surround-sound

speakers. Most likely, he realised, it was Leela's sudden uncharacteristic hush.

He knew that he could rely on her as a barometer, and Leela was always curious:

she demanded accuracy and understanding. However, the action was just

washing over her as she catatonically munched her popcorn. And where was this

place anyway?

A shadow briefly moved across the picture.

The Doctor uncrinkled a bag of jelly babies from his coat pocket and popped

one into his mouth. Jelly babies helped him think. There was a darting

movement in the shadows on the ceiling. He definitely hadn't imagined that. He

looked up, then looked about him once more, and then a piece fell into place as

he become conscious of something that had been niggling at him. The theatre

was about three-quarters full. Every single person in the cinema wore a thin

bracelet, which sparkled on their wrist as their hands transferred popcorn from

tub to mouth.

Every single one was eating popcorn.

He was glancing at the bracelet worn by the young man seated next to Leela,

when the man turned his head and looked directly at him. His expression was

blank, but there was the suggestion of awareness buried behind the eyes. The

young man opened his mouth and exhaled a sigh. 'Haaahhhh...' His mouth

closed, and then opened again, his voice this time a hoarse, barely audible

whisper. 'Haahhh. . huurghhh. . helllp usss.' And he turned back to the movie

and stuffed some popcorn into his mouth.

The Doctor's eyes widened. Leela remained staring at the movie screen as if

nothing had happened.

Light momentarily spilled into the auditorium as the rear doors swung open

and then closed with a creaking swish. Two figures marched down the aisle,

their torch beams flickering across the patrons. The Doctor turned in his seat just

as the figures came to rest at his shoulder. Torchlight flashed in his face.

‘Can I see your ticket?’

The Doctor squinted, holding up a hand against the glare. The speaker’s voice

had been female, and he could also make out a thin male standing beside her.

Both wore bow ties. ‘Hello,’ he began. Glancing down, something else about the

figures caught the Doctor’s eye: in the hand not holding the torches, each figure

clutched an elaborate ray gun. They too were levelled at his head.

The Doctor nudged Leela. She didn’t respond.

‘Are you meant to be in here?’ one of the figures — Betty, according to her

name badge — demanded.

‘Well, now. .’ The Doctor worriedly nudged his companion again. ‘My friend

and I were just. .’ He turned to peer at her: she was still completely absorbed in

the film, jaws chewing away. ‘... eating popcorn,’ he finished darkly, an edge

entering his voice. He gently took the tub from Leela’s hands, placed it on the

floor, and shook her. Leela seemed to awaken, and took in the scene with

surprise.

‘You are intruders,’ said the other figure, Liam. ‘You are not part of the

program.’

‘Program, eh?’ The Doctor slowly stood, pulling Leela up with him. ‘It’s

interesting you should mention that. Which program would that be, exactly?’

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Betty and Liam stepped back to allow them out of the row.

Leela tensed and sprang. She aimed below the level of the flashlight beams,

and took down Betty like a rugby player thwarting a try. There was a heavy

thump as they landed, and an energy bolt narrowly missed the Doctor’s head as

it streaked to the ceiling.

Liam pivoted and pointed his gun down towards the struggling pair.

Making a grab for Liam’s arm, the Doctor tried to turn aside his aim, but the

youth was unnaturally strong. He elbowed the Doctor viciously, and the Doctor

fell awkwardly into the laps of an oblivious elderly couple. Struggling to right

himself, he couldn’t help but notice that all the while, the seated pair simply

gazed vacantly ahead.

Liam was attempting to get a clear shot as Leela and Betty rolled in the aisle.

Leela desperately worked to disarm the woman, whose dropped torch was

flashing crazily around the room as it was kicked and jostled in the struggle.

Large twitching shapes scurried in all directions as they sought to retain the

shadows. The human audience remained unresponsive in their seats.

The Doctor leapt on Liam's back, desperate to distract his aim, while on the

floor, Betty was choking Leela with savage force. Leela summoned all her

strength, and with a choked cry, she threw the woman off her. Betty went flying

and hit a chair hard.

Her head rolled off.

It clunked down the aisle. The severed neck sparked, and wires trailed as it

bounced down the shallow steps to the front row.

The headless body twisted and lunged for Leela again.

Richard's eye was distracted as a severed head came spinning to a rest

beneath the screen. It rocked briefly on one heavily rouged cheek, and then was

still. A blackened wire trailing from the neck sparked angrily, causing blonde

curls to smoulder.

Looking to his right, Richard saw a man clinging like an ungainly limpet to

the male usher's back.

Then Debbie lifted popcorn to Richard's mouth. He succumbed again

to

darkness.

Liam bucked and whirled, trying to dislodge the Doctor, who clung on in

desperation. It couldn't last. Finally, he began to slip, and Liam gave a great

heave, sending the Doctor flying over his shoulder to barrel into Betty's

advancing body. Betty staggered — but only momentarily — and then she

continued her advance on Leela.

Realising he still had something tightly clutched in his hand, the Doctor

looked down to find that it was one of Liam's arms, gushing a shower of sparks

from the severed shoulder joint. He used it to hit Betty. She rounded on him.

'Run, Leela! Get out of here!'

Leela vaulted over the front row of chairs and darted towards the neon exit

sign at the front. Liam raised his gun to fire and the Doctor looped his scarf

around the adolescent android's remaining arm. He yanked in time to deflect the

energy bolt, which hit a crawling something halfway up the wall. The thing

squealed and fell with a thud.

Roughly, the headless Betty grabbed the Doctor by the shoulder. Liam

swung

his ray gun back to cover him.

The Doctor raised his hands. It was only then that he noticed how quiet it had

become. The movie soundtrack — which had punctuated the struggle — was

gone, replaced by a ringing silence. Then a gargling voice boomed around the

auditorium.

‘Who are you?’

The android usheress loosened her grip, and the Doctor turned to look up at

the giant movie screen.

At the three bulging eyes that were staring back at him.

The exit door burst open and Leela raced out into the shiny white emptiness.

Her footsteps slowed for a moment as she tried to get her bearings, then wide-

eyed, she sprinted on into the mist.

‘Hello there.’ The Doctor smiled and waved at the creature on the screen. ‘I’m

the Doctor, and I’m afraid you just missed my friend Leela. As did your android

here.’ He gave the one-armed Liam a friendly pat. Liam lurched. The Doctor

quickly removed his hand.

The manifestation on the movie screen was like the product of an unhappy

union between a warthog and a blancmange. His bloated, bristly body

was

poured into a loud checked suit. His three eyes, emerging from the centre of his

swinelike face, pivoted watchfully on their long stalks between pointed gristly

ears. Atop his head he sported a bad comb-over.

‘What are you doing aboard the good ship *Boo to the Goose*?’ he rumbled.

‘Ah, is that where I am? How terribly interesting.’ The Doctor grinned

widely. ‘I’m afraid I was having a little misunderstanding with your colleagues.

One of them quite lost her head. I’m so terribly sorry, I don’t believe you

introduced yourself. .?’

‘I am Grugvengler,’ snarled the alien. ‘Of the G’Ug.’

‘How splendid for you.’ The Doctor smiled politely.

‘Now tell me what you are doing here,’ the alien growled. ‘You are not one of

the tagged. Could it be that you are the one who is eating my soldiers?’

‘Soldiers?’ The Doctor looked about him at the mixed bag of catatonic

humanity slumped in their seats. ‘Did you say soldiers?’ He watched the

popcorn, the glazed stares and the twinkling of the bracelets. ‘Did you say *eating*

your soldiers?’

‘Enough!’ Grugvengler waved his pudgy fist in anger. ‘If you do not wish to

cooperate, you can be made to conform. Usherbots, prepare him for

in-flight

entertainment!’

Leela had run. She wasn’t sure why. The Doctor had told her to run, so she

had run. It was not like her. Her instinct had been to fight, but she trusted the

Doctor — he was a wise shaman, her teacher and her friend. When he told her

she must run, she had run.

That was still not like her.

Leela shook her head in annoyance, trying to clear the fuzziness that lingered

still. The trance had crept over her without her knowledge, and she did not wish

for it to claim her again.

She slowed. A ghostly Leela was approaching through the misty whiteness.

She stopped, and the approaching figure also stopped.

Cautiously, she crept forward, her hand hovering near her knife. The other

Leela did the same. As she warily approached, she realised that what she was

seeing was her own likeness reflected against a milky surface. Raising a tentative

hand, she pressed against it gently. It was solid.

‘Hello?’

Her hand caressed the smooth barrier. Slowly, she knelt, exploring the

unseen

obstruction all the way down to the floor. Feeling what appeared to be a crease

where the wall met the floor, Leela whipped out her knife and inserted the blade

into the crack. She grunted.

After a moment of levering and prodding, Leela straightened, re-sheathed her

knife and banged her fist against the barrier.

‘Show yourselves! I know you are there. I feel your eyes watching me.’

Nothing happened. Leela’s blurred reflection mirrored her frowning

disappointment. She thumped the wall again.

‘You are cowards. Lurking behind your wall like worms beneath a stone. You

are weak and spineless creatures with no honour.’

Leela waited a moment to see if her provocation had stirred a response. There

was nothing. Resisting the urge to give the barrier a final petulant slap, she

turned and stalked away.

The mists closed around her.

The android ushers pushed the Doctor ahead of them up the stairs.

‘You know, I could fix that arm for you if you asked nicely,’ the Doctor told

Liam. The android ignored him.

They arrived at a door marked ‘Projection Booth’ and the Doctor turned to

Betty as she opened the door and pushed him through. ‘Are you sure I

can’t help

you get your head on straight? Or just on?’

‘Wait in here,’ said Liam.

The door slammed against the Doctor’s protestations. There was a clunk as it

locked. He turned and peered into the chattering gloom. Something dark

scurried away in his peripheral vision. The projection booth was automated, he

realised; no one was needed to supervise the running of the films. There was

something in here with him, though, of that much he was certain. There was

more to the noise in here than just the rattling of the projector. He turned at the

sound of a pattering scamper.

In the far corner he could just make out a small mound of human bodies.

Dark shapes moved across it.

An angular insect head suddenly reared out of the dark. The thing was about

chest height, chitinous and spiny. Its compound eyes glowed. More of the

creatures emerged from the lurking shadows. The first creature moved forward.

‘Hello,’ it said as it advanced. Turn.’

‘Ah,’ said the Doctor as he whipped out his sonic screwdriver.

Leela had made her way back cautiously to the cinema. All the way there, she

had felt curious eyes watching her.

Choosing not to approach from the front, she slipped round the edge of the

building until she found an open window. Then, climbing nimbly on to the sill,

she slipped headfirst through. She rolled like an acrobat as she hit the tiled floor

beyond, and came to rest in a standing position with her knife drawn in

readiness.

Part of the room was partitioned into small cubicles, while the opposite wall

was lined with basins and hand driers.

A woman stood leaning against a basin, gazing hollowly into the mirror

above.

As Leela made her unconventional entrance, the woman turned in surprise.

‘Hello, dear,’ she said. ‘Are you new?’

‘Excuse me. I say, hello! Excuse me!’ The Doctor’s voice boomed as he

competed with the reverberating soundtrack. On the immense screen, a light

aircraft was leaving a misty airstrip. The engines rumbled.

After a moment, the film cut out and the three-eyed alien was back, squinting

down into the suddenly silent darkness.

‘Ah, there you are,’ said the Doctor cordially.

‘What. . What are you. .? I thought you were. .’

‘Locked up and being converted? Yes, well, I really don’t have much of a taste

for popcorn, especially when it’s drugged. And, frankly, I just wasn’t terribly

keen on spending too much time in a projection booth teeming with weevils.’

‘Eh?’

‘I’m very sorry to have to tell you this, Grugvengler of the G’Ug, but you

have an infestation of intergalactic space weevils. Nasty, but nothing that can’t be

dealt with by a good exterminator and a bit of judicious spraying.’ The Doctor

grinned. ‘Now, let’s see if we can’t get this all sorted out so that I can find my

friend and be on my way.’

‘But how did they get on board?’

‘The eggs were probably in the popcorn. Did you get it wholesale? Cut price?’

The three eyes narrowed. From somewhere just off-screen came a mumbled

voice: ‘Sorry, sir.’

‘Now, weevils are omnivorous, and while they’re not usually predatory, they

can’t seem to resist sitting targets. They are starting to acquire a taste for human

flesh, and I’m simply not going to tolerate that. Humans are a particular

favourite species of mine. Which reminds me. .’ The Doctor dropped

his affable

attitude and his voice became steely. ‘What are you doing with these humans?

Hmm? What are you up to, Mr Grugvengler of the G’Ug?’

* * *

66

‘They call us Grugvengler’s Army,’ said the woman — Connie Watson, she’d

said she was called.

‘You are warriors?’

‘More like unwilling mercenaries.’ Connie looked at Leela steadily. ‘We are

all abductees, swiped in secret and tagged for experimentation. But

Grugvengler’s an opportunist; he’s a maverick who knows how to manipulate

their implants to his own ends. We’re collected when our services are required

and returned when the job is done.’

‘But you are old.’

‘And some are young, some are crippled, and many unfit. Like he cares, as

long as he gets paid at the end of the job. We’re snatched from our lives, primed

for our mission, then let loose on the latest enemy. The only thing is —’ she

turned troubled eyes to stare at Leela the in-flight entertainment is different this

time. I think we’re being prepared for the end. I don’t think we’re

expected to

return.'

Leela stared at Connie for a moment, then asked a question that had been

bothering her. 'Why are you not in a waking sleep like the others?' she said.

'Ah, well,' Connie replied. 'I never much liked popcorn. Gets stuck in my

dentures.'

'So let me get this straight. You're basically a puny bunch of nerdy aliens who

are too cowardly to do your own fighting but too egotistical to admit your

limitations. You regularly abduct an unfortunate scattering of humans, rob them

of free will, and use them as your personal army, despite their unfitness for the

job. How am I doing? I mean look at these people; they're not soldiers — they're

teenagers, office workers, pensioners...'

'They're my retirement fund, Doctor,' Grugvengler cut in. 'They've been a

lucrative business and they're about to engage in their last great battle. There are

voyeuristic races in this galaxy that just love a good blood bath, and will pay top

dollar to watch it. I'm sending my team "over the top" for a Reality War channel

on Kentillion 12. They're audience favourites, but it always pays to quit while

demand is high. It will be a glorious slaughter. I anticipate record ratings. I, of

course, get a share of the box office.'

'No.'

Grugvengler looked surprised. 'No?'

'No.' The Doctor's face was thunderous. 'I'm going to stop you.'

'Oh, I think not, Doctor.' Grugvengler's bizarre image began to shrink. 'You

see, I'm going to stop you from stopping me.' He was rapidly diminishing in size

as he spoke, as if the camera were widening out from a close-up. 'And that,

Doctor —' Grugvengler was now a small figure at the bottom of the screen is

because I am in control.'

He stepped from the screen and into the auditorium, and glared defiantly up

at the Doctor. In the flesh, Grugvengler was smaller than he had appeared on the

movie screen; the top of his head was just about level with the Doctor's waist.

Flakes of dry grey skin speckled the top of his shiny pate between greasy strands

of hair.

The projected view on the screen now showed the control room he had just

vacated. Grubby brown walls gave way to chunky green control panels

apparently rendered in Bakelite, and highlighted by dim yellow lighting.

Surrounding the empty brown-leather command chair, several other three-eyed

warthog creatures sat at the control panels, trying to look busy. They peered

shiftily out into the dark of the cinema.

Grugvengler's hand dipped into his jacket and emerged clutching a remote

control. The device was boxy, with three rows of coloured buttons, and a

bobbled aerial on top. He waved it triumphantly at the Doctor.

'You can't stop me, Doctor! See how my mighty zombified army awakes!' He

pressed a big red button. Nothing happened.

Grugvengler muttered and shook the remote control. The Doctor waited

patiently, an expectant smile on his face. Grugvengler peered at the device, gave

it a shake, and very deliberately pressed the big red button again.

The people in the cinema seats began to shift and moan. Slowly, they hauled

themselves to their feet and looked blearily around, popcorn spilling from laps

unheeded. The thin bracelet at every wrist now pulsed with a red demonic light.

Disentangling herself from her boyfriend, one girl stood up and stretched.

Beside her, the boyfriend opened his mouth wide and gave a hissing snarl. The

girl joined in.

Grugvengler's piggy features beamed with pride as he turned to the swaying,

shuffling ranks. 'Kill the Doctor,' he bellowed. 'Kill the intruder!'

The Doctor sighed and held his sonic screwdriver aloft. He pressed a button.

From behind Grugvengler, Liam and Betty emerged through the emergency

exit doors. Liam had both his arms, and Betty's head was back in place. As the

zombified humans shambled towards the Doctor, the android ushers began to

close in on the little alien.

'I took the trouble to fix your androids,' the Doctor explained. 'I even made

one or two adjustments. After all, my friend and I damaged them, and it's only

right to take responsibility for one's actions, don't you find?'

The G'Ug in the projected control room watched nervously out of the corners

of their eyes.

'And the thing is,' the Doctor said, gesturing at the nearest humans who were

now reaching for him and drooling, 'I think that if we were to restore free will to

these good people, then they might consider that *you* had actions for which you

needed to take responsibility.'

Liam snatched for the device in Grugvengler's hands, and the little alien

danced away, alarmed, clutching it to his chest.

‘Humans are thinking, feeling, cultured beings.’ The Doctor hesitated. ‘Well,

most of the time they are, anyway.’ He cleared his throat and was about to

resume his tirade when a noise distracted him. It was the scuttling, tapping

sound of thousands of insect legs. Grugvengler had also become aware of the

sound; he was looking around himself warily, still maintaining a safe distance

from the androids. The humans had stopped their advance on the Doctor and

were scenting the air keenly, their expressions alert.

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The noise intensified, until it was a persistent thundering.

Weevils poured from every corner, emerging from beneath the seats, scuttling

down the walls, climbing from behind the dusty drapes that hung at either side

of the movie screen. They flowed through the rear doors in a glimmering amber

tide of angular bodies.

The massed humans scanned the room hungrily.

Grugvengler, whose path back to the screen was being blocked by the

androids, pushed his way forward into the crowd. Liam followed, while Betty

remained to block his retreat.

The young woman next to Grugvengler was watching the weevils with

predatory stillness: suddenly she gave a hiss and pounced on the nearest one. As

she leapt, her boyfriend too sprang forward to grapple an insect.

As if a dam had broken, throughout the auditorium the zombified humans

began to attack the creatures that had preyed on them as they slept. The weevils

were no match for the enraged humans. Carapaces cracked, multi-jointed legs

twitched. The Doctor looked on, speechless.

In the projected control room, the G'Ug had abandoned all pretence at

nonchalance, and were watching events in consternation, their eyestalks

swaying.

The stream of weevils continued to surge through the rear doors, driven

forward by a loud and exultant yell. 'Yaaahh!' Leela burst in, followed by a

woman of advanced years whom the Doctor did not recognise.

Pushing his way through the writhing mass of humans and insects, Liam

finally caught up with Grugvengler. He grabbed the little alien and held him fast

by the collar, confiscating the control device.

Leela stomped up to the Doctor. 'You are consorting with the enemy!'

The Doctor looked surprised. 'Consorting? Oh, no, I wouldn't say we were

consorting.' He called to the alien across a sea of struggling bodies.

‘We were just

having a bit of an old chin-wag, weren’t we, Grugvengler?’

Struggling in Liam’s iron grip, the alien opened his mouth to retort. A piece

of popcorn sailed through the air and into Grugvengler’s mouth. Reflexively, he

swallowed. At once, his expression slackened and his eyes glazed over. The

woman who’d come in with Leela walked up to him, her head held high.

‘My Alfred was one of your “troops”,’ she said, the last word dripping in

disdain. ‘He died on one of your pointless campaigns. I’ve had to soldier on

without him. Now it’s just me, and Chairman Meow. I have a responsibility to

that cat, and to myself, and I can’t keep going on like this. It has to stop. All of

these people have lives and loved ones, and they deserve to make their own

choices. I have to finally bid my husband goodbye, and you —’ her voice cracked

‘-- you are done here.’

‘Your plans gang aglay, ugly one!’ Leela told the alien.

The Doctor looked at his companion approvingly. ‘Very good, Leela,’ he said.

All around them, the battle had continued raging. The humans had attacked

mercilessly and the weevils had been falling back, taking heavy losses. Now, the

insects had finally found a means to retreat; a steady flow of weevils was

heading towards the movie screen.

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As the insects began to pour into the projected control room, and the humans

followed, the G'Ug panicked and fled.

'Come on, Leela,' the Doctor said, striding into the screen, 'we've work to

do...'

Once the weevils were corralled in the flying saucer, the nervous and

remorseful G'Ug were easily persuaded to return the humans to their homes.

Without the influence of Grugvengler, the crewmembers were, as Leda insisted

on pointing out, as timid as mice.

Sometime during all the chaos, Grugvengler disappeared. Betty and Liam

were charged with finding him. They were still searching when the Doctor and

Leela finally departed.

Grugvengler sat alone in the empty auditorium, outlined by the flickering

light of the projector. He gazed blankly at the giant screen. Slowly, his hand

lifted popcorn to his mouth.

'Yum.'

Grugvengler's hand paused. He turned in his seat toward the source of

the

scratchy voice.

Directly behind him sat a weevil, regarding him hungrily from glowing

compound eyes. Its great amber head swayed gently and its antennae waggled.

For a moment their eyes locked, and then the weevil started to climb over the

seat towards him.

‘Hello,’ it said.

70

Into the Silent Land

Steven A. Roman

An Adventure of the Fourth Doctor,

with Romanadvoratrelundar

I

He was dreaming about the garden again.

It was late in the spring, and the first roses were beginning to bloom. Autumn

Damasks they were, a particularly fragrant breed that dated as far back as

eleventh- century Persia, which is precisely where he’d obtained the seeds

during his travels. A brief, pleasant stopover with Susan, Ian and Barbara that

had, for a change, been free of misadventures.

Of course, the roses, like the garden, didn’t actually exist. They were

part of a

dreamscape his subconscious had created over the centuries — a psychological

haven he could retreat to when his wearied mind and body needed to rest. He'd

been spending time in the garden for a few days now, although he couldn't

fathom the reason why; he couldn't even remember the last time he'd thought

about it. What he did know was that he'd begun to prefer this fictitious

countryside to the constant hopping about the universe in which he normally

engaged, and the thought of remaining here had a certain appeal to him.

Cavorting up and down the time stream was for younger men, and it had been a

very long time since anyone could refer to him as being a young man.

Perhaps, he thought as he gazed out of the window, it was time to consider

retirement. Or at least turn his attentions to cultivating tulips, if only to give the

poor roses a break from his obsessive tinkering.

But those were topics to be internally debated on another day, he decided.

Right now, there was a spectacular, sun-drenched morning to enjoy, just made

for a bit of puttering about the garden, and he'd had quite enough of sitting in

the house, staring at the walls — even if they weren't real. So, he picked up his

thick canvas gloves, his pruning shears and trowel, and his wide-brimmed sun

hat, and ventured forth.

The flagstone path gently sloped away from the Victorian-style house and

down the hill, curving around towards the back, past the large, glass-paned

greenhouse containing his African violets, to end at the vine-covered, wire-frame

arch that served as the entrance to the rose garden. He walked with a light, easy

step, head tilted back, enjoying the sunshine and thrilling to the breeze that

whispered past his ears to flutter the edges of his hat. He paused a moment to

inhale deeply, filling his lungs with the intoxicating scent of fresh air, fresh soil

and the heady perfume of roses in full bloom.

‘A glorious day,’ he said contentedly as he continued his walk. ‘Absolutely

marvellous.’ So marvellous, in fact, that even his joints had stopped aching — for

now. He felt like a man half his age... and considering just how long he’d been

living, that was saying a great deal.

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It was only when he was making his way past the greenhouse that he realised

something was wrong.

The face he saw reflected in the house's small glass panes. . it looked

different. Not that he didn't recognise it; he knew its features quite well, of

course — it was his face, after all, why shouldn't he? The ears were a trifle

unappealing, the teeth a little too oversized — mind you, he did like the nose;

had, in fact, always considered it a vast improvement — but still, it was his face,

all right. The problem was, it just wasn't the face he was expecting to see,

certainly not in this rustic setting. The one belonging to the older, grandfatherly

man he'd been several lifetimes ago. The one with the overbearing ego and the

shoulder-length white hair. Well, perhaps he still possessed some of the former

— Romana certainly seemed to think so — but as for the latter... He whipped off

the sun hat to find, not snow-white locks, but an unruly mop of dark brown

curls. He frowned.

'This isn't right,' he muttered. 'Not right at all...'

'Come to tend my roses this time, have you?' said a sharp, demanding voice.

He turned to face the speaker. Standing a few feet away was the white-haired

man who'd been missing from the reflection, looking as tall and stern and

imposing as he remembered.

The Doctor. This was his home, his garden. And he didn't seem at all pleased

to see his guest.

'I asked you a question, young man,' the Doctor said bitingly. 'You've been

availing yourself of my home and my good nature long enough. Have you now

decided to tend my roses, or just muck about the garden like the other two did,

adding your own touches?'

Still as charmingly brusque as ever, the traveller thought. Good nature,

indeed. He looked around, towards where the Doctor was gesturing. Beyond the

boundaries of the rose garden stretched two enormous tracts of land, one

populated with tiny blue forget-me-nots, the other with double-bloomed

hollyhocks. Combined with the roses, it all made for a veritable sea of colours,

spread as far as the eye could see. It was a breathtaking sight, a marvel of

landscaping, but something about the whole scene felt. . wrong.

No, he realised. It wasn't the location that was wrong. It was him.

He shook his head. 'I shouldn't be here.' He paused, then turned back to the

Doctor. 'Should I?'

The old man clasped the lapels of the black frock coat he wore, then tilted

back his head slightly, so he could look down his nose at his guest. 'And why

not, hmm? What makes you say that?'

'L..' He rubbed his right hand through his mop of curls, then grimaced. 'I

didn't think it was my time yet.'

The Doctor snorted. 'Everyone thinks that, young man. If we were allowed to

choose the time of our passing... well, I imagine we'd all choose to be immortal,

and never have to face the issue.'

The traveller ran the edge of his index finger back and forth beneath his lower

lip for a few brief strokes — a nervous tic he'd recently acquired. 'I suppose... It's

just that I don't remember losing my spot in the queue, so to speak.'

He pulled at

his lower lip with the thumb and forefinger of his right hand for a bit, feeling the

Doctor's stern gaze practically boring holes in him.

'But I thought this was all just part of a dream,' he muttered, then hesitantly

gazed at his host. 'Isn't it?'

'That is a distinct possibility,' the Doctor agreed.

'Well, that brings some measure of relief,' he said gratefully, although he felt

anything but relieved. 'So, is my being here meant to be a warning of some kind?

A sign that my final hour may be approaching? That I should prepare myself for

the worst?'

'How drolly melodramatic,' the Doctor commented drily. He went back to

looking down his nose, acting every bit the professor berating a particularly

thick-headed student. 'My boy, dreams are whatever you make of them. And

since this is your dream — if, indeed, it is a dream — then anything I say to you

could very well be only what you wish to hear.'

'Ah.' He returned to gently tugging at his lower lip for a few seconds. Then

he smiled awkwardly. 'You wouldn't happen to know what that is, would you?'

The Doctor started. ‘What what is?’ he demanded.

‘What it is I wish to hear.’

The Doctor frowned. ‘Do you enjoy playing the fool, young man, or am I to

understand from your behaviour that the level of my intelligence slips

downwards with each regeneration?’ He grunted. ‘If that is the case, I imagine I

should be a complete imbecile by the time my lives have run their course.’

‘Well, I prefer to think of it as we’re becoming more… personable,’ the

traveller replied with a smile.

The old man’s frown only deepened in response. His eyes narrowed, and he

silently glared at his unwelcome guest.

The traveller’s smile faded under the heat of that withering gaze. For the first

time, he began to wonder if this was a dream. If it truly were, he was fairly

certain he wouldn’t have imagined the Doctor as such a crotchety old bear…

‘All right,’ he began, get us say that this lovely garden is nothing more than

part of the dreamscape I — we — created for when we — I — need to rest, and

that you’re here because…’ He shrugged. ‘Well, because you were first.’

‘Go on,’ the Doctor said.

‘So, perhaps your role is to act as a guide of some sort. To enlighten the rest of

us in the ways we can best prepare ourselves for. . when our times come.'

Another shrug. 'Or at least to point us in the direction of the tool shed so we can

assist you with the roses. I notice the La Ville de Bruxelles are looking a bit

wilted...'

'A guide?' The Doctor snorted. 'Do I look like the poet Virgil to you, young

man?'

'No,' the traveller agreed with a smile. 'But then no one would ever confuse

me with Dante Alighieri. Too tall for the part, you see.'

The Doctor grunted.

'So. I know why I'm here, and I have a basic idea of why you might be here as

well.' The traveller waved at the fields of blossoms that lay beyond the roses.

'But what, then, am I to make of the extensions to your garden? What

significance do they have?'

The old man sneered. 'I assure you, they were not my idea. The little tramp

apparently got it in his head that he needed to leave behind something of himself

before he moved on. That operatic dandy who followed him did the same.'

'I don't understand,' the traveller said. 'Why would they feel the need to do

that?'

'To show that they had been here,' the Doctor explained. 'That they had

existed.' He eyed his guest warily. 'I wonder what you'll insist on planting when

the time comes...'

And then the TARDIS shuddered to a halt as it materialised, and roused the

curly haired traveller — a Doctor now well into his fourth incarnation — from

his slumber.

The Doctor sat up and swung his legs over the edge of his bed, on to the

carpeted floor; he groaned softly as his back muscles tightened from the small

exertion. Ignoring the painful twinges, he leant over and put on his shoes, then

pushed off the mattress to stand up, and looked around. He didn't use his room

all that often — in fact, he rarely used to sleep — but lately he'd been feeling

more and more fatigued, and found himself retreating to the solitude of this

chamber with disturbing regularity. It didn't possess the personal touches that

Romana or any of his previous companions had added to their own rooms — no

potted plants, no souvenirs from his travels, no reminders of home — but then

he'd never been long on sentiment. Thus, he kept his furnishings simple: four-

poster bed, a few antique chairs, a roll-top desk, chest of drawers, and a walk-in

wardrobe that contained more clothes than he ever remembered needing.

Attached to the chest of drawers was a large vanity mirror, and it was that

which drew the Doctor's attention. He stepped over to gaze at it, and was

pleased to find the mop-haired reflection he'd been expecting. He took some

comfort in that— for a split-second, he'd been worried he'd find a white-haired

old man in its polished surface. But then his gaze drifted upwards, to inspect the

once-dark curls.

Another grey hair, he noticed. Quite a few of them, really. Sprouting like

weeds in a once verdant garden. When had that started, he wondered.

'Well... one or two grey hairs is nothing to worry about,' he assured himself.

He titled his head back, to study his features, looking down his nose at the

reflection. 'Besides, grey hairs can make one look quite distinguished. .' He

shrugged. 'Well, more distinguished than I already am. And on most civilised

worlds, they're usually considered a sign of great wisdom.' He slowly turned his

head from side to side, admiring the view. 'Yes.. And after 750 years, I can

honestly say I'm the wisest person I know.'

He grinned broadly, but it was a false smile, a forced smile. It lacked the

humour, the whimsical spark that normally lit his blue eyes. And it quickly

evaporated, leaving him with only a sombre, ageing man staring back at him

from the glass. A man who looked every one of those 750 years.

He inhaled sharply, ready to loose a weary sigh, when he suddenly caught a

whiff of something in the air. A flowery tang that seemed to fill the room, like a

heady perfume.

Or the scent of roses.

II

Romana had never been to Maine before, but it seemed a pleasant enough

locale. A bit too cold and snowy in November for her liking, though; she could

have done with the full-length coat she'd sometimes worn during her first

incarnation. But the Doctor had put a stop to that notion before they'd left the

TARDIS, explaining that a bright white fur might be considered a sign of

disrespect by the members of the congregation they'd come to join. And as she

looked at the veritable sea of grieving, black-clad men and women gathered

before them at the graveside, Romana had to admit the Doctor had been right in

his belief. It would have been the height of rudeness to show up in colourful garb

for such a serious occasion.

Hannah Gites had been an acquaintance of the Doctor's, and that was all he'd

said on the subject after he'd set the coordinates, although she'd asked why they

were travelling to late-twentieth-century America. He'd been more forthcoming

with information after the TARDIS had landed. Hannah was an old friend, not a

former travelling companion, whom the Doctor had known for close to two

decades. The news of her unfortunate passing that he received via space-time

telegraph wasn't entirely surprising to him, he explained — she was over ninety

years old, and humans lived such tragically brief lives — but it still clearly

affected him.

'Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind,' he'd

commented, then smiled sadly. 'I don't think John Donne would have disagreed

that such a sentiment could apply to women as well.' And then he'd walked into

the depths of the TARDIS, presumably to prepare himself in some way for the

service they were about to attend.

Romana did likewise, settling for a black, ankle-length woolen coat with

black fur trim on the collar and cuffs, to go with the black skirt, gloves, boots and

midnight-blue sweater she'd selected. Her shoulder-length blonde hair was tied

back — more to keep it from swirling about her head in the frost-tinged breeze

than any desire to appear stylish — and tucked under a tall, heavy lambskin hat

the Doctor had given her. To hear it had belonged to one of his earlier

incarnations had been a bit of a surprise; he rarely talked about his other selves,

even in passing.

She had been even more surprised when she'd walked into the TARDIS

control room a short while after she'd got ready to find that the Doctor had taken

his own advice and dressed in a more conservative manner... well, conservative

for him, that is. The eyebrow-raising clash of styles he usually leant towards —

from battered felt hat to scuffed shoes — had been replaced by a more uniform

look of burgundy hat, coat, waistcoat, boots and trousers. Even the impossibly

long, multi-coloured scarf that always trailed around the Doctor's feet had been

swapped out for another of equal length, but of a more subdued black-and-red

woolen pattern.

It made him look... well, like an adult was the first thing that had popped into

Romana's mind, although she immediately felt guilty for thinking it. There was

nothing childish about the Doctor, although, she had to admit, there were

moments when he acted in an almost childlike manner: fairly hopping about

when he was happy, brooding and poutish when he was angry. His mood

swings were often as difficult to gauge as his staggering choices of attire.

Yet, it wasn't only his clothes that were different, she had realised. There was

something different about him, as well — in his demeanour, his body language.

The way his shoulders hunched and his head leaned forward in an oddly

vulture- like posture. The dull gleam in his normally bright eyes. The wisps of

grey sprouting among the brown curls, and the deep lines that had appeared on

his face. When, exactly, all this might have happened, Romana couldn't begin to

guess; she hadn't really noticed the changes before. The Doctor had always

seemed so young, so full of life, even for someone of his advanced age, that it

was almost impossible to now think of him growing old.

But the evidence was right before her. He looked weary. He looked sombre.

He looked... ancient. As though the spirit had been drained from him. As though

the years had finally caught up with him, and now weighed heavily upon his

shoulders.

Could he be reaching the end of this incarnation, she wondered. It was

always a possibility for a Time Lord — none of them was immortal, after all. If

so, Romana had no doubt that, barring some catastrophic circumstance, he

would regenerate when this body had reached its end, whenever that might be.

And it was more than likely the new incarnation would be just as insufferably

headstrong as his predecessor.

And yet...

And yet, even though the Doctor would go on living in some form or another,

having grand adventures and risking his life time and again, she suddenly

realised that this man standing beside her, this particular Doctor, would be no

more. And Romana couldn't help but feel a bit melancholy at the prospect.

The service ended just short of an hour later, and the mourners began filing

out of the cemetery; eventually, the only people remaining were the two

travellers, a pair of gravediggers waiting to fill in the plot, and a woman in her

forties — Hannah Gites's daughter, Giselle, according to the Doctor. Slowly, she

turned to face the visitors, but didn't seem all that surprised to see them. She

made her way across the snow and up the small rise to join them.

'Are you the Doctor?' she asked.

He smiled politely. 'I am. And you must be Giselle.' He gestured towards his

companion. 'This is my friend, Romana.'

'My condolences on the loss of your mother, Miss Gites,' Romana said as they

shook hands.

'Thank you,' Giselle said. She turned back to the Doctor. 'Thank you both for

coming. I wasn't sure if you'd received the notice.'

'Paying my respects is the least I could do for Hannah,' he replied. 'She

passed gently, I hope.'

'Yes, thank God,' Giselle said. She paused, and stared intently at him for a

few moments.

'Is there a problem?' the Doctor asked.

'I'm not sure,' Giselle admitted. 'It's just that, from the way Mom used to

describe you, I was —'

‘Expecting someone else?’ The Doctor grinned. ‘I get that quite a lot.’

She nodded, though it was clear she had no idea what he was talking about.

‘Your mother was a remarkable human being, you know,’ the Doctor said. ‘She

was a great help to me in my hour of need.. as I know she was to a great many

others.’

Giselle nodded, and smiled wistfully. ‘Yeah, that was Mom, all right. Always

ready to lend a hand, no questions asked. I understand you’re like that too, from

what she told me.’

He smiled. ‘Well, I do have my moments...’

Giselle nodded again, clearly none the wiser, then started. ‘Oh,’ she said, and

reached into the large handbag she carried, to rummage through its contents. ‘I

thought it was a long shot you’d actually show up, but I brought this along

anyway...’ She came out with a small leather-bound book, which she handed to

the Doctor. ‘Mom said you forgot to take it with you after your last visit, and she

wanted me to make sure you got it.’

The Doctor smiled wistfully as he gazed at the tiny volume. ‘Yes... I was in a

bit of a hurry that day.’ He dropped the book into one of his coat pockets. ‘Thank

you.’

Giselle gestured back over her shoulder, in the direction in which the

mourners had filed out of the cemetery. ‘Well, I really have to be going. Everyone

will be coming to the house tonight, and I have to get it ready. You know,

Doctor, you and Romana are both welcome to join us. I’m sure we’d all love to

hear your stories about Mom.’

For a moment, the Doctor’s face brightened, and it seemed to Romana that he

was going to accept the invitation. But then he gently shook his head. ‘I wish we

could, but Romana and I have to be going ourselves.’ He patently ignored his

companion’s quizzical stare.

The Doctor — turning down an invitation to a large social gathering? There

must be something truly wrong with him, she thought.

Exactly what that might be continued to elude her as they made their way

back to the TARDIS. He’d fallen into one of his contemplative moods — she

recognised it by the faraway look in his eyes, and the way he tugged at his lower

lip —leaving her to her own thoughts. Most of those, however, focused on how

best to get him to talk about whatever was troubling him — to ‘open up’, as

human psychologists often said in the information she’d come across while

studying methods of Terran psychotherapy. (There had to be some reason why

the Doctor was so drawn to Earth and its inhabitants, after all; she thought the

answer might be found by examining case studies of the human mind. It wasn't.)

The problem was, the Doctor rarely took advantage of a sympathetic ear when it

was offered, although he was more than willing to listen to someone else's

troubles when they needed to get something off their chests.

She glanced over as he trudged through the snow. The ends of his scarf

trailed along on both sides of him, leaving behind a wobbly set of tracks that

looked as though some drunken, bow-legged cross-country skier had passed this

way.

'So, what was it that made Giselle's mother such a remarkable human being?'

Romana finally asked. 'Did she help you stop an alien invasion? Devise a way to

prevent the collapse of the space-time continuum?'

'Gardening,' the Doctor answered.

That caught her off guard. 'I beg your pardon?' she asked. 'Did you say—'

'She helped me with my gardening,' the Doctor replied. He held up a hand

and wiggled his fingers. ‘Hannah had marvellous green fingers.’ He came to a

sudden halt, eyes fairly bulging from their sockets as an idea apparently struck

him. ‘Gardening... You know, I never focused on that until just now,’ he

muttered, rubbing his jaw in contemplation. ‘What an amazing coincidence...’

Of course, being the Doctor, he didn’t bother to elaborate on the nature of the

‘coincidence’. He just grunted, then set off through the snow once more.

‘And it was her gardening skills that made her so exceptional?’ Romana

asked.

‘Well, of course not!’ the Doctor snapped, as though she’d been foolish to ask.

‘Anyone with a decent understanding of horticulture can plant a few seeds and

spread some fertiliser around. Do you think so many people would have

attended the funeral of a simple gardener?’ He snorted derisively, and quickened

his pace.

Romana hurried to catch up. ‘You’re being obtuse again, Doctor. .’ she said

with more than a hint of annoyance.

He stopped short again, and wheeled around to face her, eyes wide as billiard

balls. ‘Am I?’ He sounded surprised.

‘Yes,’ Romana answered as she drew alongside.

‘Ah,’ said the Doctor, pulling on the syllable until it was almost as long as his

scarf. ‘Well, Hannah was a poet of some renown, whom I met during a brief

sojourn in America. She wasn’t famous — most of her work was released

through small publishing houses, but she did have a fairly large readership. Of

course, I wasn’t aware of that when I met her. It was her garden that got my

attention; she had the most incredible collection of roses. I stopped to ask her

advice about some La Ville de Bruxelles I was having some trouble cultivating,

and we got to chatting.’ He smiled. ‘She got me to buy one of her books over tea.’

‘And thus a friendship was born.’

‘Yes. She was a fascinating woman, and her poetry spoke volumes about the

human condition: love, loss, kindness, the redemption of the soul. Her words

brought joy and comfort to many people; more than she ever realised, if today’s

turnout was any indication.’ The smile faded. ‘And yet, she was always

concerned that she hadn’t done enough with her life. That when she died, she

would fade from memory without ever leaving her mark in the world.’

‘Well, from the number of mourners,’ Romana said, ‘I’d think it impossible

that anyone could forget her.’

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‘Indeed. As the saying goes, she’ll continue to live on in the hearts and minds

of the people whose lives she touched.’ He scratched his jaw. ‘I wonder if the

same will hold true for me.. ’ he muttered cryptically.

III

She found him in the TARDIS’s library, still wearing the burgundy-and-black

ensemble. The scarf and coat lay draped over a thick-cushioned reading chair;

the hat was set at a rakish angle atop a bust of Pallas near the chamber door. The

Doctor was slowly pacing back and forth across a large Persian rug that lay on

the parquet floor, near the first of the innumerable mammoth bookcases, whose

shelves seemed to stretch up and out towards infinity. In his left hand was an

open book, his gaze fixed on whichever passage had caught his attention. The

thumb and forefinger of his right hand, meanwhile, were engaged in gently

pulling at his lower lip.

‘Change of scenery, Doctor?’ Romana asked.

He slammed the book shut and spun round to face her. For a moment, he

looked almost like a child caught doing something he shouldn't, eyes wide in

surprise, mouth slightly agape. Then he jammed his right hand into his trouser

pocket, puffed out his cheeks, and exhaled sharply. One of those typically

Doctorish gestures meant to stall for time while he formulated an answer.

'I noticed you've been spending quite a lot of time in here since we left Earth,'

she added.

'Well,' he began with a small shrug, 'there's nothing wrong with a little

change from time to time, is there, Romana? Change of scenery, change of

attitude —'

'Change of wardrobe?' Romana interrupted with a smile.

The Doctor glanced at his attire and grinned. 'Precisely.' He slid his hand

from his pocket, to gesture at the coat and scarf. 'It seemed appropriate, given

Hannah's passing. Besides, I think it looks quite—'

'Morose?' she offered with a playful smile. 'Funereal?'

He frowned, clearly annoyed with her assessment. 'Fashionable,' he rumbled.

"Fashionable": Her smile broadened, and she pointed to the flared lapels of his

shirt collar. 'With question marks on your lapels? Isn't that a bit—'

'Questionable?' the Doctor asked slyly.

‘Silly,’ Romana said.

‘”Silly”?’ snapped the Doctor. ‘”Silly”?’

‘Silly,’ she repeated. ‘Trifling. Frivolous. A lack of common —’

‘Yes, I know what “silly” means,’ he interrupted snarkishly. He turned away,

as if to return to his ruminations, then spun back round. ‘You’re not exactly the

pinnacle of sartorial splendour yourself, you know,’ he added huffily.

She decided to let the remark pass without comment. Instead, her left

eyebrow crept upward in a quizzical fashion. ‘Are you all right, Doctor?’

‘I’m perfectly fine, Romana,’ he said quickly. ‘Couldn’t be better.’ He

scrubbed his right index finger under his nose, like he was scratching an itch,

then waved the hand towards her in a dismissive gesture. ‘Look, isn’t there

something you could be doing right now instead of hanging about and insulting

my clothing selections?’

‘Such as?’ she asked.

Again, his cheeks puffed out as he exhaled. He rubbed his hand through his

mop of curls. ‘Oh, I don’t know. Checking on the omni-directional impulse

stabiliser so we don’t accidentally materialise inside-out on our next trip; you

know how it’s been acting up lately.’ A shrug. ‘Fixing the chameleon

circuit.

Making a pot of tea.'

'Tea?' Romana asked incredulously.

'Tea,' the Doctor repeated. 'Boiling hot water poured over dried leaves to

create —'

'I know what "tea" is, Doctor,' she interrupted snarkishly.

'Good!' he replied. 'You'll find some excellent Darjeeling in one of the

cupboards in the pantry. Give a shout when the kettle starts whistling.'

And with that he turned and strode off, boot heels clomping on the wooden

floor as he moved down the rows of bookcases.

For a moment, Romana stood rigid, slowly burning over the way he'd so

sharply dismissed her. Make some tea, indeed, she thought darkly.

Then she noticed he'd left behind the book he'd been reading. With all the

theatrical gestures the Doctor relied upon to distract one's attention as he spoke,

it was small wonder she'd missed out on the one that had transferred the book

from his hand to the small table on which it now rested.

She walked over and picked it up. It was a collection of Terran poetry, the one

Giselle Gites had presented to him: *The Sixty Best Poems of England* — Hannah

Gites, editor. And he'd turned down the corner of one of the pages to mark his

place.

‘Well, of course, Doctor,’ Romana muttered sarcastically. ‘Why bother using a

bookmark when it’s so much easier to just manhandle a page?’ She sighed, then

opened to where he’d left off: a verse titled *Remember* by Christina Georgina

Rossetti:

‘Remember me when I am gone away,’ she read aloud. ‘Gone far away into

the silent land.’

Romana frowned; she didn’t like the sound of that. And as she continued

reading, the frown deepened.

‘When you can no more hold me by the hand,

‘Nor I half turn to go yet turning stay.

‘Remember me when no more day by day

‘You tell me of our future that you plann’d:

‘Only remember me; you understand

‘It will be late to counsel then or pray.

‘Yet if you should forget me for a while

‘And afterwards remember, do not grieve:

‘For if the darkness and corruption leave

‘A vestige of the thoughts that once I had,

‘Better by far you should forget and smile

‘Than that you should remember and be sad.’

She closed the book and set it back on the table. ‘Oh, Doctor,’ she muttered

worriedly. ‘What is it that’s troubling you.. ?’

IV

He was dreaming about the garden again.

‘You’re wearing out your welcome here, young man,’ the Doctor said, with a

frown that seemed to start at his hairline and end at his toes. ‘This is not some

hostel for the troubled of mind, where you can simply barge into my home and

settle in whenever you feel the desire to do so, and I won’t have it treated as

such.’

‘Well, I hate to be a bother,’ the traveller replied as he walked down the

flagstone path towards his host, ‘but I’m curious about something you said

before.’ He grinned knowingly and tapped the side of his nose with a long index

finger. ‘It’s in our nature, you know — being curious.’

The Doctor hmmphed and grasped his lapels. ‘very well — ask your

questions. I imagine I’ll never have a moment’s peace until you have your

answers.’

‘You mentioned that my... predecessors felt the need to prove they existed.

I'm not certain what you meant by that.' He held up a hand before the Doctor

could answer. 'And please don't tell me you're only going to say what I wish to

hear, because what I wish to hear is an explanation.'

The frown cracked —just a hair. 'Decided to stop playing the fool, hmm?

About time, I say.' He turned and began strolling down to the garden, his guest

falling in step beside him. 'I've been watching you, young man, and I must admit

you've done far better with your time than I initially expected.'

'My time,' the traveller noted. 'You make it sound as though it's nearing its

end.'

'All things end, dear boy,' the Doctor replied with surprising warmth. 'Just as

all things change. And never is that more true than for Time Lords. Each of our

incarnations lives a hopefully full, productive life, and then either the

advancement of our years or some unfortunate incident causes us to regenerate.

To change. To metamorphose, like the butterfly, and begin life anew in another

body.'

'But we remain the same person, despite the change.'

'Precisely,' the Doctor replied, 'as it is for all our people. In our case, you and

the others represent different aspects of me — splinters of personality given form

and function.' He glanced at his guest's Bohemian appearance. 'Although what

part of me could have produced you escapes me...'

The traveller smiled. 'The more carefree side of you, I should think.'

The Doctor grunted, then continued. 'When one aspect of a Time Lord's life

comes to an end, you don't think it simply dissipates into the ether, do you? Of

course not! It returns to that area of the mind that spawned it, and becomes part

of the next incarnation's memories.'

His guest frowned. 'So, I'll become just a memory...'

'As we all do when our time has passed,' the old man said. 'You weren't the

first Doctor who ever had to deal with Daleks or Cybermen, you know. You're

merely drawing upon my experiences for reference.'

His guest nodded. That was true, but... 'And the additions to the garden?'

'As I told you, young man, they were not my idea. It started with the little

hobo, when the High Council of Time Lords forced his regeneration as

punishment for his — our — prior.. indiscretions. He was quite upset that his

identity was to be supplanted by another, and worried that no one would

remember him when the next incarnation took his place.

‘That concern grew when the High Council wiped all memories of him from

the minds of his companions, and returned them to their respective time zones

seconds after they should have left with him on their travels. For Zoe and Jamie,

it was as though he’d never existed. And when he was deposited here, he did the

only thing he could think of doing before he moved on.’

‘Leaving a marker of sorts,’ his guest said. ‘To prove he had existed.’

The Doctor sneered. ‘Forget-me-nots. I always thought I had more of an

imagination than that...’ He shook his head. ‘As for the one who followed —

your direct predecessor... well, he was never the type who’d be willing to admit

if someone had a better idea. He’d initially wanted to erect a statue; I was

certainly having none of that. He had to settle for a garden, although it galled

him that the little tramp had thought of it first.’

The traveller nodded. ‘Yes, he did possess a fairly sizeable ego... although

what part of you could have produced him escapes me. .’ He glanced at his host

with a sly smile.

The Doctor merely glared back at him until his guest looked away.

‘Now, what about this next incarnation?’ the traveller asked. ‘When is he

supposed to make his entrance?’

The Doctor tilted his head back, in the direction of the house. The traveller

looked towards the top floor, and realised that someone was watching them

from a window in the attic. He was too far away to be seen clearly, but the

traveller had a general impression of an all-white attire, and an almost blank

face, as though the features of his future self were yet to be decided.

‘Not just yet,’ the Doctor said with a knowing smile. ‘Not until the time is

right. But trust me, young man — the moment has been prepared for.’

‘Yes, I suppose it has...’ the traveller muttered.

A weight settled in his stomach. Until now, all this talk of memories and

markers and gardens had been nothing more than an interesting, if slightly

disturbing, look into his own thought processes. But here he was, staring up at

his own future, and suddenly he could feel the remaining moments of his life

ticking away. A life that would soon belong to another. It filled him with a sense

of dread, of loss, of .. inevitability.

The old man extended his hand, which his guest limply shook. ‘Farewell,

Doctor,’ he said to his younger counterpart. ‘We won’t be seeing each other again

until you’re ready to begin your journey towards... what lies out there.’ He

nodded past the roses, past the forget-me-nots and hollyhocks, to the horizon.

The Doctor ran a hand through his curly mop of hair, and grimaced. ‘You

wouldn’t happen to know what I’ll find out there, would you?’

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‘Now, why should I tell you if I did, hmm? I thought perhaps you’d want to

find out for yourself.’ His host smiled gently, and tapped the side of his nose

with an index finger. ‘It’s in our nature, you know — being curious.’

The Doctor frowned at him. ‘I never could abide gallows humour…’

V

A day after their discussion in the library, Romana looked up from her

repairs under the TARDIS’s hexagonal control console — grudgingly working on

the omni-directional impulse stabiliser, which had needed adjustment — to see

the Doctor enter the control room.

He looked solemn, distant.

‘Doctor,’ Romana finally said after a moment or two, ‘I understand that you

prefer to keep your own counsel, and I’ve never tried to pry into your affairs —’

‘But?’ he asked.

‘But it’s obvious that whatever it is that’s troubling you is consuming your

thoughts.’

‘I’ve been thinking,’ he replied. Romana decided not to bother pressing for

information; knowing the Doctor, she’d have her answers soon enough — for

good or bad. ‘In a valley on a far away planet, there’s a large face carved into the

side of a mountain. My face.’

When she was finally able to recover from the shock, Romana said, ‘Really,

Doctor, I didn’t think you were that vain.’

‘Oh, it wasn’t my doing,’ he replied. ‘A tribe called the Tesh carved it over

two centuries ago as a. . well, as a sign of respect.’

‘The Tesh. .’ Romana searched her memory of what she’d read of the Doctor’s

travels. ‘So it’s the planet where you met that savage you left back on Gallifrey?’

‘Leda.’ The Doctor nodded. ‘Yes. It was her homeworld. Or at least the planet

where her ancestors’ colony ship crashed.’ He fell silent and drummed his

fingers on the edge of the console. The puzzled expression on his face made it

clear he was silently debating whether to set landing coordinates for that distant

world. ‘How do you think you’ll be remembered, Romana?’ he finally asked.

‘When you’ve reached the end of your lives, I mean.’

That was an odd question. ‘Why do you ask?’

‘Oh, just curious,’ he commented offhandedly, although it was obvious

he

was hinting at something.

‘I’m not sure,’ she admitted. ‘I’ve never really thought about it. I certainly

wouldn’t have my face carved on a mountainside in order to remind people

where I’d been.’

‘Better than having no reminder at all...’ he muttered.

‘Doctor, what is this all about?’ Romana demanded. ‘You’ve been behaving in

an unusual manner — well, more unusual than I’ve come to expect — ever since

Hannah’s funeral. Why do you have this sudden interest in how future

generations will remember you?’

He stared at her for a moment, then looked away. She was about to press him

again when he muttered, ‘I’ve been having a recurring dream lately. Well.. not

exactly a dream, really — more like a series of conversations with a prior me.’

‘And what do you talk about?’

‘Gardening,’ he said, then fell silent.

‘Gardening?’ Romana asked. That seemed to be a popular topic with him

these days. . ‘Like your discussions with Hannah when you visited her?’

‘Yes...’ he said slowly, as though in a trance; then he snapped awake

and

turned back to her. ‘What? No, this is entirely different. It’s more about... well,

leaving one’s mark in the universe.’

‘Leaving one’s mark?’ Romana asked, eyebrows raised.

‘Yes, leaving one’s mark!’ he snapped, then wiped away the spittle on his

chin with the back of his right hand.

Romana sighed. ‘Come now, Doctor. I didn’t think you of all people were the

sort who dwelled on such trivial matters.’

‘Neither did I,’ he said, his voice a soft rumble. Then he glared at her. ‘And

what do you mean by “trivial”? This is my life we’re talking about!’

Romana wasn’t about to be drawn into a meaningless debate, not when she

was more interested in getting to the heart of his morose introspection. ‘So, what

is it about gardening that makes the dream so disturbing for you?’

‘It’s not the gardening,’ he replied, ‘so much as its meaning.’

‘And that would be...?’

‘Retirement. Being put out to pasture.’

Romana frowned. ‘Doctor, Time Lords don’t “retire”, we...’ Her voice trailed

off as she suddenly realised what he was implying. ‘Oh.’

‘Indeed,’ he said.

‘But what does that have to do with this concern of yours about being

remembered?’ Her eyes widened. ‘He didn’t say this was your last

incarnation,

did he?'

'No,' he replied.

'Then I don't see why you should be so upset. You've already regenerated

three times. I'm sure the new you will share some of your.. more unusual

character traits. Regeneration might alter our personalities, but it doesn't affect

who we are inside.'

'But he won't be me,' the Doctor replied in an exasperated tone. 'And in case

you hadn't noticed, I've got quite used to having me around.'

'But you'll still be the Doctor, no matter what you look like.'

'No, he'll be the Doctor,' he replied. 'I'll just be a bit of memory tucked away

in that cluttered repository I call a brain.'

'But that doesn't mean you'll be forgotten, if that's what's been worrying

you,' she countered. 'Think of the battles you've won, the injustices you've

righted, the countless billions of sentients you've saved by your actions, even if

most of them will never know of your involvement. If you believe a new body

will make the cosmos suddenly forget the man responsible for all that, then you

really haven't been paying attention to what you've accomplished. You've done

a great deal of good with this life, Doctor, and you still have a great deal more to

do with it before your time is done.' She smiled gently. 'And when that time

comes, then, as the saying goes, you'll continue to live on in the hearts and minds

of the people whose lives you touched.' The smile became a wry grin. 'If nothing

else, think of that giant head carved into the side of a mountain. If that doesn't

count as proof of your existence, I'd be hard-pressed to come up with an

alternative.'

His cheeks coloured slightly with embarrassment. 'Well, I do tend to make a

big impression on some people. .' he admitted with a small grin.

As Romana had hoped, her comments seemed to have done the trick for his

bout of melancholy, for the Doctor's spirits seemed much higher than they'd

been in quite some time. Either that, or he was putting on a good show for her

benefit and hiding his true feelings...

'What do you think about taking a holiday, Romana?' he suddenly asked. 'I

could do with a bit of relaxation.'

'Holiday?' She quickly held up a hand to cut him off. 'And, yes, Doctor, I

know what a “holiday” is.’

‘Splendid! Have you ever been to Brighton?’ He shook his head before she

could answer. ‘Well, of course you haven’t! Locked away in your ivory tower on

Gallifrey like all the other Time Lords —’

‘All the other Time Lo—’ Romana began.

‘—and Time Ladies,’ he continued, loudly talking over her, ‘you’d never

shown any interest in going anywhere until you barged your way into my

TARDIS.’

‘I’d hardly consider my home an “ivory tower”, Doctor,’ she said with some

amusement. ‘And I didn’t “barge in”, as you well know.’

He grunted. ‘Yes, well, you’ll find the Brighton Pavilion considerably more

interesting than your stuffy old apartment,’ he promised.

‘Oh? How so?’

‘I haven’t the slightest idea,’ he replied. ‘I missed its opening the first time.

But, really, anything is better than hanging about on Gallifrey...’

VI

He was dreaming about the garden again.

And wondering if it was too late in the season to consider planting some

tulips...

Wake

Jake Elliot

An Adventure of the Fifth Doctor,

with Nyssa of Traken and Tegan Jovanka

He's here again.

Verin only managed a quick glance at the man before he passed out of sight

behind a catafalque but Verin was sure he recognised him. A more slightly built

figure than before, but still wearing a long coat. Beige, this time. There were two

girls following in his wake as he strode ahead in that characteristic way he had.

The appearance might change, but you could always tell. Verin wasn't sure how

long it had been since the man had last been here, but there was only one reason

his sort visited the Necropolitan. He'd find out in time.

Verin was in a hurry. He'd been left on his own to clear up after a particularly

violent rendering. The other senior attendant, Cora, was trying to reschedule

subsequent ceremonies while the room was refurnished. And now there was a

Rite of Crystal to prepare, numerous silicate and mineral extracts to arrange in

intricate mourning patterns for the funerary bier. Verin hated organising

exequies for petrological life forms.

Along the corridor, Verin could see the billowing ceremental robes of a

Solemn One.

Not now, of all times, he thought and swore under his breath.

The Solemn Ones were the omni-denominational, intra-dimensional funeral

officials who ran the Necropolitan. Verin had to bow and go through a

complicated series of gestures to extend reverent thoughts. The Solemn One

barely even acknowledged him, swishing past with the most perfunctory

murmur from the shadowed depths of his cowl. Verin was certain he felt a pat on

his head too. He glowered at the departing figure.

The Necropolitan was an official place of mourning, a neutral zone for those

wishing to grieve or pay last respects according to their particular custom. It

existed to cater for all races, religions and philosophies and for this reason was

dimensionally interstitial. The oldest parts of the Necropolitan, where the

catacombs were now situated, were supposed to be constructed from bone, the

carved remains of enormous creatures from the beginnings of the universe. This

was one of the more pervasive myths about the Necropolitan, one of the ancient

stories that resurfaced from time to time, and although this was a

point Cora

among many others disputed, Verin thought there was something in it. The

catacombs always smelled funny.

A bell tolled from somewhere nearby. Verin looked around, scanning the

corridor behind him where he could only see the diminishing figure of the

Solemn One. There was a funeral party heading this way. That meant at least

another five minutes of genuflection and ritual obeisance. Verin hurried forward

— in contravention of at least three edicts on funerary behaviour — and darted

through the archway leading to the Theosophy of Water, which he could take as

a short cut. After a few minutes making his way past the Pools of Memory and

muttering brief extracts from a generic homily, Verin abruptly slowed his brisk

walk as he saw someone approaching. It was Styles, the shop steward for the

professional mourners known as the Grievers. Verin measured his steps to the

accustomed pace. Styles was a stickler for the observation of proprieties.

‘Lamentations,’ breathed Styles, making the first of what looked to be a

comprehensive series of signs.

Verin took a chance and interrupted. Will you be attending the Crystalline

Departure this afternoon?'

Styles lowered his arms with a pained expression.

'There will be a delegation of Grievers, of course, as is proper. I have to meet

with the Solemn Ones. My members were displeased with the conditions they

had to work under at this morning's rendering.'

Verin shrugged. 'It was a bit messy,' he agreed.

Styles cast him a disdainful look.

'Anyway,' continued Verin. 'I'd better hurry on. I've got plenty to do.'

Styles offered him a thin smile. 'Please refrain from hurrying. It is not

permitted.'

Verin stood extremely still and drew in a long, steadying breath as he

watched the Head Griever glide away. Verin wondered how deep the Pools of

Memory were.

One of the girls reminded him. She spoke quietly but Verin was near enough

to hear, although in the chapel hush the rest of her sentence was wrapped in

echoes.

Doctor. That was it. Funny that he hadn't been able to remember on his own.

It must have been some time since the Doctor had visited the Necropolitan.

When would it have been?

Verin stood beside one of the pillars lining the central hall. This was a place of

remembrance, where those who wished to mourn without any funeral service

might do so. The hall was vast, too large to see the circumference or the ceiling,

with small alcoves honeycombing the walls in which mourners could place

artefacts to remember the deceased. Verin often thought that the Time Lords

must have had a hand in the architecture.

Verin was standing in attendance for a nearby mourning party. An old man, a

woman in a shiny space suit, and something that looked like a desiccated

aspidistra in a Bath chair were in silent contemplation in front of an alcove. The

plant kept shaking with rustling sobs.

On the other side was an elderly man in Victorian dress with surprisingly

long grey hair. He was supporting himself on a stick and staring gloomily at a

small withered white flower he had placed in the alcove.

The Doctor had his head bowed, his hands clasped behind his back. He was

lost in reverie, his two companions standing on either side of him in dignified

silence. All of them occasionally glanced at the small metal star placed in their

alcove.

The woman in the shiny space suit touched one of the plant's leaves and

turned to Verin. 'We're ready to go,' she whispered.

Verin bowed and clasped his hands in front of his chest before he led them

away, their footsteps echoing amid the thousands of other mourners moving at a

decorous pace through the hall.

His hands still glittered, Verin noticed, smudged from the various mineral

deposits he had sprinkled for the Rite of Crystal.

When they reached one of the archways that led out of the hall, Verin

stopped to take off the purple sash he was wearing and replaced it with a white

one. He folded the purple sash according to the six conventions and posted it

down the chute.

'Would you like me to show you to the portal now?' he said politely.

The plant shook and tapped its leaves together in a complicated rhythm.

The old man peered at the aspidistra with an ear trumpet in his hand. 'No,

thank you,' he replied, looking from his rattling companion to the woman and

then at Verin. 'We will visit the gardens first.'

'Thank you,' said the woman, beginning to push the chair.

Verin bowed again.

As he walked away he caught sight of a number of Solemn Ones. They were

walking quickly and the figure leading them had broken into a jog.

That wasn't allowed. Solemn Ones were only ever permitted to move quickly

during terpsichorean ceremonies.

Verin approached, trying to look as though he was going about his usual

duties.

The Solemn Ones gathered around a doorway leading down to the

catacombs, all of them hurrying through the procedures for greeting and then

talking rapidly between themselves. Several other attendants appeared from the

steps to the catacombs, one of them gesturing behind him with a look of shock. A

Solemn One glided away and soon a bell chimed softly.

'What's going on?' said an attendant who had arrived behind Verin. 'I don't

know,' said Verin.

'They've found something down there,' said another attendant. 'No one's

saying what it is, though.'

The bell continued to toll, sounding innocuous enough, but it drew more

attendants and Solemn Ones who knew it was a summons. Some of the visiting

mourners had noticed the gathering as well and were starting to walk over,

looking inquisitive.

Through the archway came another Solemn One, maintaining a dignified

pace but moving swiftly enough to confound Styles, who was trying to keep up

without contravening any rules. He seemed to be complaining about an illegal

blue box that was parked where it shouldn't be and could cause obstruction or

injury to his members. The Solemn One ignored him.

'What's all this about, then?' enquired another voice behind Verin. 'I don't

know,' Verin repeated.

The Doctor stepped past him with a smile. 'Not to worry,' he said brightly.

Verin watched as the Doctor neared the group. He patted his pockets,

produced a hat he scrunched up again and put in the other pocket, before

rocking on his heels and addressing the Solemn Ones.

He'd not changed. Not inwardly. Verin recalled him arriving before. Older-

looking then. White hair. Slowed by age. He performed mourning rituals in front

of two separate alcoves, paying tribute to his recently fallen companions. Verin

recalled that one of the alcoves contained a handful of sand while the other held

a neatly folded utility belt. The Doctor had remained there for a long

time, his

head held back as if standing to attention. Another time, he had appeared

younger, more flamboyant, with a velvet coat and silvery hair. He wasn't there to

mourn, it appeared, although he looked bereaved. Instead, he wandered around

the garden for days, staring out across the sapphire fields.

Funny lot, the Time Lords. When it came down to it, they all marked the

important events of their lives with ritualised contemplation. Despite the

Necropolitan being a place for everyone, it was they who most frequently came

here, and who were the strictest adherents of the regulations. Several of them,

Verin considered, he knew by name.

His line of thought was broken by Styles. The Head Griever waved a hand to

get his attention.

'Lamentations. I don't • know what's going on here, but it all looks highly

irregular. What's most pressing is this blue box currently taking up space in the

preparatory area for excarnations. If it doesn't get dealt with, we'll be out.'

Verin nodded. 'I'll have someone look into it.'

'Verin? What's happening?'

Verin turned to see Cora striding towards them. He heard a snort of

disapproval beside him.

‘Cora. Now that you’re here, would you be able to assist our Head Griever?’

Verin bowed and left. Cora had even less time for Styles than Verin did.

In the meantime, whatever the excitement, Verin had to travel all the way to

the cloisters on the other side of the Necropolitan. A funeral party were arriving

tomorrow from a planet where the dead accelerated to an unstable adipocere and

he had to ensure their rooms were completely dehumidified and no one had left

soap in the bathrooms.

When Verin walked back from the cloisters he passed a Solemn One who was

holding a large green scarf in front of his face and stooping to touch his head

against all the door handles along a corridor. Another Solemn One recited

eulogies from a book.

Verin couldn’t recall precisely, but he was sure it was a ritual for when

something had gone wrong. He stopped to watch for a moment, trying to think

what it meant, and heard a door open behind him.

‘Um, excuse me,’ someone said politely.

Verin turned to see one of the Doctor’s mourning party. She was dressed in a

dark-coloured suit, her face framed by a tumble of curly hair.

‘Is the Doctor back yet?’

‘I’m afraid I don’t know,’ said Verin, wondering if he had been mistaken for

someone else. ‘Where has he gone?’

‘Oh, I’m sorry,’ she replied, realising her error. ‘I’m Nyssa. I’m here with the

Doctor. He went to help the people in the robes when they found the body in the

catacombs.’

‘Body?’

Nyssa looked concerned. ‘Hadn’t you heard? Someone was found murdered.’

The Ritual of the Green Silk.

There was a very good reason Verin hadn’t been able to place it. He was far

too ,young to have witnessed it before. It was only performed when a death

occurred at the Necropolitan and that was one of the most strictly observed rules:

this was a place for mourners and departed only. Deaths must take place

elsewhere. Nobody had died here for centuries. It was taboo.

‘I see,’ said Verin calmly. ‘I’ll let him know that you’re waiting.’

Nyssa thanked him and shut the door.

Verin frowned. A death at the Necropolitan. Worse still, she had said it was

murder. Of course, the Solemn Ones would not let the majority of

guests know

that anything was wrong. They would smooth things over, maintain the

appearance of glacial calm and impeccable probity. The ripples and ruffles from

the event would be discreetly covered, obscured by ritualised order. And if

anyone looked, they would see just another dead body.

Far in the distance, the Solemn One with the green scarf in front of his face

was still touching his forehead against door handles. Verin smirked to himself,

suddenly recalling that this ritual would have to be performed on every door

throughout the whole of the Necropolitan. It would take weeks.

Verin heard the bell chime for a meditation period.

The chapels of rest would be free for at least an hour, plenty of time for the

attendants to freshen the flowers, blushed crystals and solid algebras. If it was

quiet enough, they might even be able to re-tie the bouquets of temporal flux.

Despite the Necropolitan being an officially recognised neutral zone, where

even incompatible ontologies maintained a precarious *entente cordiale*, it was

surprising that disputes never occurred. Inevitably, all the requisite harmony

and tranquillity features had been developed over time, but the most soothing

muzak or grace enhancers couldn't do much to stop mortal enemies taking pot

shots at each other. Verin thought back over the past few days. There were the

space burials for the victims of an internecine conflict several light years away —

the Necropolitan had been chosen for the service because of its distance from the

events, in both senses. Plenty of opportunity there for a revenge killing.

Similarly, they had dealt with the remains of a recently executed serial killer.

Verin didn't know much about this — it had been undertaken amid the strictest

secrecy, in case of protests or media attention.

And there were the Beast People attending this morning's rendering, a

bloody ceremony where the immediate family tore the body apart, thereby

sparing it the indignity of being eaten by enemies, according to the custom.

On a whim, Verin took out his com-pad, checked there were no mourners

around, and asked the console whether the Beast People had left yet. The console

bleeped and displayed a departure record. Verin tucked the com-pad away, not

reassured. They'd left an hour after their allotted time.

Two crews of attendants were busily at work in the chapels of rest when

Verin arrived. He walked through them quickly, inspecting what had already

been done and supervising things that remained. The crews were full of furtive

whispers about the afternoon's drama.

Verin caught sight of Cora, fine-tuning a holographic orrery in which a giant

spider sat at the centre.

'Has any more been said about the incident this afternoon?' Verin said after

they had performed a cursory greeting ritual.

'That would be the one where I had to deal with the blue box?' Cora said

drily. 'Styles was all ready to go to arbitration before I talked him out of it.' He

switched off the hologram. 'But I suppose you mean the other incident.'

He waited while two attendants walked past carrying dead flowers from the

altar vases.

'The deceased was a visiting funeral director from one of the out-world

subsidiaries,' Cora explained in hushed tones.

Verin shook his head. 'That's terrible.'

'At the very least. This could be disastrous if they decide to make something

of it, and worse if Styles finds out they don't recognise Grievers.'

'Are the Solemn Ones aware of any suspects?'

Cora shook his head. 'I don't believe so. One of the mourners is

assisting the

investigation. The Doctor.'

That would be about right, from what Verin knew of the Doctor. He

frequently arrived in places prior to something going wrong or some danger

being exposed. It was as if disruption trailed after him.

'Perhaps he may be able to help,' said Cora.

'Perhaps,' agreed Verin thoughtfully.

The bell tolled once again, indicating the end of the period of meditation.

Cora and Verin paced around the chapels, inspecting the attendants' efforts then

ushering them away before any of the mourners returned. Cora bowed and left

with them, keen to prepare for some of the late-night ceremonies, while Verin

remained. He activated the dimmer controls and began to light the rows of

candles, creating little flickering dots of flame stretching back behind him.

He should go to bed soon. There was a lot scheduled for tomorrow.

The Trevelyn Orbit was home to some of the neatest and tidiest people in the

galaxy. If they could do anything to avoid inconveniencing any other life form,

they would. When gravitational forces began to tear their worlds apart, they

escaped in a massive starliner, booked burial space at the Necropolitan in

advance and began the thousand-year journey. They would be reaching a

docking portal some time today, with just over one million mummified corpses

requiring funerary attention.

Verin carried the plans for the Trevelyn Orbit interment to the Solemn Ones

for approval. Space was cleared in the catacombs in readiness and the final

procedural speeches needed to be delivered over the forms.

As Verin rounded the courtyard leading to the Solemn Ones quarters, the

Doctor dashed across the flagstones.

‘Ah, good,’ he said, drawing to a halt as he saw Verin and taking a breath.

‘Now, very important. I need to speak to someone in charge. It’s about one of the

Solemn Ones.’ The Doctor held up his hand. ‘No, don’t worry. Everything is

under control. Can you just direct me, please?’

Verin pointed across the courtyard. ‘Through there,’ he said.

‘Thanks,’ said the Doctor and bounded off, his coat tails flapping.

Verin frowned and looked through the archway the Doctor had just appeared

from. He began to walk forward, cautiously, wondering what was going on.

Perhaps it was his imagination, but he was sure something moved in the gloom.

Verin stopped and peered. There was a slight rustling.

‘Hello?’ he called out uncertainly.

A Solemn One seethed out of the darkness, the ceremental cowl still draped

around the shoulder sash, exposing the withered death’s head.

Verin immediately stooped and began to extend reverent thoughts but the

Solemn One waved these away.

‘We have been raised prematurely,’ the Solemn One hissed. ‘A mourner,

prohibited, interrupted our peace.’ The Solemn One indignantly dragged the

cowl over its sunken, leathery features. ‘Performed an examination of our being,’

it breathed in hushed, awful tones.

The Doctor.

Of course, he wouldn’t know. If he found a Solemn One at rest... if he checked

for vital signs... He wouldn’t know that the Solemn Ones were revenants.

‘Is there anything I can do?’ Verin called out after the departing Solemn One.

‘No.’ The figure turned slightly. ‘If anyone wants me, I’ll be in the catacombs.’

Perhaps it would be better to seek out the Solemn Ones a little bit later. The

Trevelyn Orbit ship hadn’t even raised docking protocols yet.

Verin walked back across the courtyard.

Behind him, he could hear the Doctor striding back the way he had

come.

‘He’s over here. .’

Verin looked at his com-pad. The Trevelyn Orbit ship had arrived, ready to

disgorge its lifeless passengers. Verin wished he had more time — the rooms he

had prepared the day before could still do with a final dehumidification and

there were several other mourning parties to attend to. At least he’d found a

Solemn One to incant over the forms.

Verin put away his com-pad as an attendant walked alongside him, leading a

row of brightly coloured orbs that bobbed in the air. The attendant carried a

large butterfly net, held across his chest. These mourners were gaseous clusters;

catastrophically flammable. They needed constant supervision in case they

drifted too close to a cremation or funeral pyre.

‘Lamentations.’

Verin turned to find two Grievers making sympathetic gestures towards him.

Verin returned the formal greeting.

‘We are anxious to find the Head Griever. Have you any knowledge of his

whereabouts?’

Verin looked surprised. It wasn’t like Styles to be unavailable to his members

— generally he took a dutiful pleasure in being a constant presence, there to

intercede at the merest suggestion that events were contravening the Grievers'

rights.

'Not recently,' said Verin. 'Is he perhaps already waiting for the Trevelyn

interment?'

Styles was particularly hot on delayed ceremonies.

The Grievers conferred and bowed their farewells.

There was a little time before Verin was required at the catacombs so he made

his way to the cloisters to take a final humidity reading, passing through the

main hall as he did so. Everything was running in the usual efficient, reassuring

manner. Ashen mourners, weighed by grief or the sheer scale of the place, were

led to alcoves or directed to other memorial features by the numerous

attendants. Solemn Ones occasionally moved through the corridors and

courtyards, carefully deployed to generate dignity. Everything looked calm.

Strange that Styles should have gone missing. And there was the death that

occurred the day before. Unheard of events, both.

Perhaps the Doctor's aptitude for uncovering mayhem had come to the

Necropolitan after all.

Verin shook off the thought. If things were happening, he'd know about

them. One of the senior attendants would be involved. No, everything was pretty

much the same as it ever was, Verin decided. It never got very lively around

here.

He reached the cloisters and checked the humidity readings. Quite safe.

Nothing to get excited about.

On the way to the catacombs he encountered a funeral party engaged in the

Rite of Elegant Turning. This was a custom pertaining to itinerants and nomads,

where it was felt to be disrespectful to leave the remains in one place. Every so

often, the bones would be transferred from one vault to another. In this instance,

the remains were ashes and had been stored in two linked glass bubbles. When

the ashes drained from one into the other, the device could simply be upended.

Verin slipped through a doorway, keen to avoid the rituals required to

acknowledge an Elegant Turning. He was always left feeling giddy when the

blood rushed to his head.

In the narrow reliquary, Verin was surprised to see the end of the Doctor's

coat lying on the floor, a beige puddle extending from beneath the

doorway to a

store cupboard.

Perhaps the Doctor had dropped it.

Verin walked over to retrieve the coat, wondering if he had enough time to

return it to the Doctor before the ceremonies in the catacombs. As he drew

nearer, he saw that the key was still in the lock and it was being rattled and

pushed from the other side.

Verin turned the key and pulled the door open.

The Doctor tumbled towards him, falling on his coat, and his two

companions stared at Verin in alarm.

‘Decided what to...’ the Doctor began, picking himself up and wiping his coat

before he looked at Verin. ‘Oh. I thought you were someone else. Thank you for

that. I was nearly there.’ He put his coat back on. ‘Nyssa, Tegan, come along,

there’s not much time.’

The Doctor bounded away and his companions hurried after him.

‘Thank you for rescuing us,’ one of them said politely before running after the

others.

Strange people.

Maybe it was some obscure ritual he’d never heard about.

The route to the catacombs was curiously deserted. This was one of the things

about the Necropolitan that Verin always appreciated — despite the vast size

and the universe full of beings who came here to mourn, it was still possible to

find pockets of quietude. Sometimes, if he was conducting maintenance work or

architectonic rituals in one of the neglected theisms, Verin could spend the whole

day without encountering anyone else. Just him and the accumulated presence of

resting millennia. It was a comforting thought.

One thousand steps down into the catacombs.

The chill air moved past him in eddies as Verin ducked under a swollen

knuckle of rock and stepped into the outer regions of the catacombs. Far below,

he could hear the sounds of movement as the Trevelyn ship was emptied. Verin

took out his com-pad and requested light. Small points of illumination, discreetly

studded into the surrounding rocks, lit up the path. Verin began walking

towards the Trevelyn interment, listening as the steady drone of the Solemn

Ones grew louder.

The rock — looking ever more like massive discs of vertebrae along this

section — was bisected by narrow walkways through which attendants could

pass and place the wrapped remains in hollows cut in the wall. So far, everything

seemed to be going according to plan, the lines of attendants and Solemn Ones

bearing the bodies to their final resting places before going back to collect more.

It helped greatly that the people of the Trevelyn Orbit were about the size of

Verin's com-pad.

Over by a group of Solemn Ones who read from books of service was a

couple of Grievers, ululating as quietly as possible. Styles had raised the point

that they were being asked to perform their functions in dangerous conditions as

excessive noise could cause a rock fall. The idea had caught on.

Still no sign of Styles. It wasn't like him to miss an event as big as this.

Inevitably he'd manage to find one infringement or other, however negligible.

Verin was just about to join the other attendants in moving the bodies when a

bell began to chime insistently.

Verin looked up in horror. Something was going wrong, after all the planning

he had put into this. He saw the Grievers break off and look at the Solemn Ones.

The Solemn Ones hesitated, glancing among each other. From somewhere

nearby, Verin was sure he heard a voice call 'Doctor!'

Verin began to walk towards the Solemn Ones, intending to consult.

As Verin moved away, he failed to notice movement in one of the hollows

behind him. The cerements were fought away as something clambered

awkwardly out of the small space and a figure significantly larger than Verin's

corn-pad made its escape out of the other end of the walkway.

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There.

A million people of the Trevelyn Orbit securely and successfully laid to rest.

Things had moved faster after the Solemn Ones checked with the rituals and

found there was nothing against carrying the bodies in handfuls.

Verin looked on with satisfaction as the last of the hollowed burial ports were

painted with the necessary insignia.

They had done a good job.

Whatever the alarm had sounded for earlier, the problem had passed.

Probably a strike threat by Styles or a misread ritual that had led to disgruntled

mourners. Hopefully it wasn't a stray soap dish Verin had overlooked.

As he reached the top of the stairs and emerged into the courtyard, Verin was

surprised to see the Doctor and his two companions flanked by Solemn Ones.

The Solemn Ones all wore bright bands over their robes and had adopted

Aspects of Benediction.

‘Thank you, Doctor,’ said the Most Honourable Solemn One. ‘The people of

the Necropolitan owe you an immeasurable debt of gratitude.’

The Doctor responded with a little shrug and grinned.

‘Nyssa, Tegan, let’s get going.’

The three of them turned to the blue box and trooped inside. Verin looked on

in bemusement. The box began to make a strange droning sound that grew

louder until it contravened several regulations on acceptable noise levels. Then it

was gone.

Off on more adventures around the galaxy, no doubt, getting into exciting

situations. Living dangerously.

Nothing ever really happened around the Necropolitan.

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The Velvet Dark

Stewart Sheargold

An Adventure of the Fifth Doctor,

with Tegan Jovanka and Vizlor Turlough

It was a grey day, a day for solemnities.

Tegan watched as the simple, unadorned wooden coffin was lowered into the

ground. Black dirt trickled in streams on top of it. Rain poured into the hole. She

shivered at the claustrophobic finality of it all. She did not feel grief for the man

they were burying. She didn't want to be here, in the bitter cold, marking the end

of the Doctor's best enemy. The Time Lord had paid for everything, even made

sure there were flowers for the grave, striking white lilies no less, livid tongues

suggestive of violent death.

She glanced across at Turlough, wrapped up in a black Russian fur coat down

to his knees, his orange crop startling. His teeth were chattering; he looked just as

displeased as she was. Nyssa should have been here, she thought with a pang.

Her friend and former companion had never truly believed her father had died,

but that he was still struggling with the Master's hold over his stolen body. In a

sense it was the last remnant of her father they were burying. Had the Doctor

even considered that? She turned to the Time Lord.

The Doctor was grave and still, staring wide-eyed into the blank space of

earth that was slowly being filled with coffin. To think, all the Master's wishes

for domination, for control, still resulted in him being incarcerated in a small

oblong box, buried six feet under. Tegan wondered what the Doctor was feeling;

the Master had once been his friend. Perhaps a sense of relief that the feud was

finally over? Or was he shocked to find that an indomitable Time Lord

could

finally die; would something be missing without the arch machinations of the

Master? She was embarrassed by how fundamental he had become in defining

the Doctor himself.

The priest had reached the ‘ashes to ashes, dust to dust’ part of the rites.

Would such an all-powerful being as a Time Lord actually deign to become

merely dust and ashes? Tegan had seen the extraordinary physical regenerative

qualities that the Doctor possessed. Would the Master lay insensate but whole

under all that earth? Even for him that was somehow too cruel. Perhaps that was

why he had asked the Doctor to arrange his funeral rites. He had clearly feared

death, considering all the nefarious schemes he had thought up to steal fresh

bodies and new lives for himself.

Tegan saw the Doctor was rubbing agitatedly at the note that had simply

materialised in his coat pocket. She had found him in the Cloister Room, moody

and captious. He’d been reading the note and humming distractedly a low,

sonorous melody.

‘What’s that?’ she’d asked.

Mistaking her enquiry he’d replied, ‘Mozart’s *Requiem: Introitus*.’

‘I meant the note.’ He’d guardedly handed it to her. ‘My old friend...’ it had

started. She wondered how long ago the Master had written it.

She looked up and found Turlough watching her. He glanced askance at the

Doctor, once, and she nodded complicitly. They may not want to be involved in

this, but they were there to look after him. Judging by his pained expression, he

had taken this hard.

‘Excuse me?’ The rotund pink-faced priest waited, head inclined for some

reaction to his past words.

Tegan looked at him blankly. She realised he must have finished the rites. He

frowned at her and eyed the ground. She remembered. Begrudgingly, she

scooped up a handful of wet earth and tossed it into the grave. It thudded on top

of the coffin. There, the deed was done. Now he could be covered and forgotten.

Turlough, unfamiliar with the ritual, hesitantly followed her action. The Doctor

stood for a while longer, an incongruent frown on his youthful face. Tegan

walked around the grave and gently took him by the arm. ‘Doctor?’

He blinked and turned to look at her. For a moment he seemed elsewhere, his

eyes glazed with memory, then recognition dawned and they turned their kind,

vulnerable blue. He gave her a weak smile. ‘Thank you, Tegan,’ he said, and he

took a deep breath.

The Doctor stooped, took up a large handful of muddy earth. He looked at it

for a moment, perhaps weighing it, like justice, against the worth of the man in

the coffin and everything he had taken from them. Then he turned his hand and

let it fall quickly into the grave, the white note fluttering down amidst the dirt.

He wiped his hands clean. With that gesture he seemed suddenly back to his old

self. Though sometimes crotchety, the Doctor could never remain morose for

long. He pulled at his coat lapels to keep the rain out, the red piping striking in

the grey day. ‘Well,’ he said, giving both his companions a measured look, ‘let’s

sort out his effects, and then —’ he paused I think it’s time for tea. Come on.’ He

strode away; he did not look back. Tegan and Turlough shared a worried look.

‘Do you think he’s all right?’ she asked.

Turlough rubbed his hands together in that smug way he had that made her

tense up. ‘I’m sure he’ll be fine.’ He watched the retreating Doctor’s back, coat

tails flapping in the wind. ‘Let him do this. Get it out of his system.

They were

friends, once.'

'Then we can get out of here.' She shivered. The rain spattered infuriatingly

on her plastic mac, weighing her down. It was as though something malign had

come to visit its last respects.

'Yes.' Turlough smiled sheepishly at her. 'I don't like it here either.'

A small moment akin to friendship passed between them. Tegan let it go. But

she gave him a reluctant smile. 'Come on, then.' They followed the Doctor back

down the green hill to the waiting nursing home.

Mrs Monaghan was missing again. Laura had told her a number of times that

she shouldn't walk about by herself. She wasn't as able as the other patients. She

had accidents. They would find her after half an hour's panic stuck in a broom

closet or locked in a toilet cubicle, curled around the bowl. Always there would

be livid marks and bruises on her face and her arms from where she had

presumably bumped into walls and doors. She said she had been attacked, that

there was something that came out of the boiler room she had to flee from. It was

searched, of course, and nothing was found. Sometimes, and she was

ashamed at

such thoughts, Laura wished they could tie the old biddy down. At least then

they wouldn't have so much trouble from her.

She had a peculiarly binding relationship with the old woman; it was

uncanny how often it was Laura who was able to search out her hiding place. But

she had been searching for forty minutes now and had found nothing. Not an

errant slipper, not a tipped chair. A small seed of real anxiety was growing in the

back of her head. She calmed herself and thought through her progress. She had

checked the television room where a few patients were waiting for their regular

shows or playing card games; the kitchens were off limits but she checked them

too, the pantries empty of her charge; every broom and linen cupboard, every

closet in the manor all held only their requisite sheets, clothes and cleaning

implements; she had unlocked the big steel door to the disused mental wing and

looked in all the padded cells; the nurses' station was white and empty. There

were only the grounds left to check, and the boiler room, both secured by locked

doors, for which she had the keys.

She considered what to do next. Perhaps she should go back to Mrs

Monaghan's room. There was a likelihood that she had returned there;

it had

certainly happened before. If not, then perhaps she might find something in the

room to help decipher the woman's disappearance. The room seemed darker

when she returned, full of shadow play, the grey day bringing on evening before

time. The rain hissed at the window, wind blew in from a gap, billowing the

bottom of the heavy curtain. Laura was suddenly frightened; the movement

seemed sinister. She marched in and flicked on the switch. Light blazed in the

room for a second, then there was a sizzle and a pfut and the room plunged back

into darkness. Laura sighed. The wiring in the manor was so old, this was always

happening. She hated changing light bulbs because of the inordinately high

ceilings. She walked over and tried the bedside lamp. It worked and threw out

an amber circle across the bed and the floor.

It was clear that Mrs Monaghan was not here. There was a terrible heaviness

about the room though, it pressed into her; the hairs on the back of her neck went

up. The darkness encroached upon her. She stepped quickly into the lamplight.

As she did so she kicked something under the bed; she jumped and her heart

hammered. Shrugging away the dark, her curiosity got the better of

her and she

bent down to see. Something small. Under the bed. She reached in and took it,

brought it out into the light.

At first she thought a child had left a doll behind during visiting hours. Then

she looked closer and took in the green woolen skirt, the purple flowered blouse

and the grey shawl that Mrs Monaghan usually dressed in. Her eyes moved over

the doll, the intricacy of the weathered face, the fineness of the brown-dyed

mushroom bob. It was the eyes that confirmed it — they stared out in a grimace

of terror. One of the loafers slipped off the doll's foot. Laura dropped the tiny

figure and screamed. She had found Mrs Monaghan.

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'It's a rather small room for someone who had such lofty ambitions, isn't it?'

said the Doctor wryly, gazing about at the old pine single bed, the chest of

drawers, the worn antique cupboard. A small window next to the bed let in the

weak light of evening. The room smelled of antiseptic. 'Certainly a comedown

from a TARDIS.'

Tegan could sense the Doctor becoming maudlin again. She wondered if he

was thinking of when his time would come, his final regeneration. Would he go

gentle into that good night or, like the Master, strive for enduring physical

corporeality? She couldn't imagine the Doctor ever dying a finite death. 'We

should get started,' she said, eyeing Turlough pointedly. It irked her but the

Time Lord seemed to regard Turlough's suggestions more readily than hers. The

boy did tend to be rather more obsequious, but he had a lot to make up for. She

still didn't trust him, even after his repentance for the whole Black Guardian

fiasco, but the Doctor had blithely shrugged off his induced assassination

attempt and let him on board. It was odd but Turlough seemed like the only

alien aboard the TARDIS. She had to keep reminding herself that the Doctor

wasn't human. Perhaps that was the reason; Turlough could sympathise with the

Doctor's foreign perspective.

Taking her hint, Turlough opened the cupboard. The hinges squeaked loudly.

The Doctor whirled about and slammed the door shut. He leant against it,

wincing. 'Gently, Turlough, gently. This is still the Master we're dealing with

here. We should be careful.'

Tegan looked at the room in an entirely new light. The thin pastel

drapes

seemed able to hold a threat.

Turlough was put out at the Doctor's judgement of him. 'I had considered

that, actually,' he sniffed. He grabbed the handle and the Doctor took his weight

off the door. He pulled it open. Nothing leaped out at them. Tegan peered in.

Inside, despondent and limp on a silver coat hanger, was the Master's black

velvet costume with the elegantly stitched, brocaded collar. The Doctor reached

out and touched the velvet, frowned back into solemnity. 'I wonder how he ever

came to be here?' he mused.

Tegan gave a hollow laugh. 'He turns up like a bad penny wherever he's least

expected.'

The Doctor threw her an irritated look. She actually flinched at the force of it.

Surely he wasn't becoming defensive of the Master now? She found herself

filling with frustration and anger. She may have a limited human view of events,

but she could not just cast aside what the Master had done to her, to Nyssa, to

them all. He had not been her friend. She resented this effort they were making

in remembering him and the Doctor's dubious forgiveness. He did not deserve it.

She looked the Doctor squarely in the eye. ‘You mentioned tea? I think I

might get some. You two seem capable of sorting this out on your own.’ She

made plain the barely restrained recrimination. Grudgingly she threw out, ‘Do

you want any?’

‘Yes, that would be nice,’ the Doctor said kindly, and she hated the relief she

heard in his tone at her leaving. ‘Turlough?’

‘Ah, no, thank you,’ he said, unable to look at her.

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Her stubbornness kicked in, made her want to stay, get in the way, disrupt

their clique. But she left anyway.

Just in from the front door to the manor, there was a small alcove where

guests could hang their coats and hats on the hatrack and leave their wet

umbrellas in a special bin. Not many people registered that it was there and only

remarked upon it when nurses or doctors took their garments to hang up. It was

a small, secretive alcove, perfect for hiding in during, say, a game of hide and

seek.

The silence of the hall was broken by a strange wheezing, groaning noise that

grew in volume. A faint shape began to take form in the alcove. The

noise built

and the shape took on more solidity, as though the sound was the very thing that

was maintaining it. The sound pulled and heaved and then stopped with a dull

finality as though it could simply exert itself no more.

Where there had been empty space before, there was now an apparent

wooden coffin in the alcove. The coffin sat there, doing nothing, and then it

shimmered and warped and in an instant had become a grandfather clock.

‘Tempus Fugit’ was written above the stopped pendulum. It was a beautiful but

battered antique. The clock was silent for a moment. Then it began to tick-tock to

itself, and gradually the sound sped up, as though to align to the correct time.

The pendulum developed a smooth, exacting rhythm.

There was movement behind the glass body of the clock. Shadows spilled

into the pendulum compartment. The wooden door opened unexpectedly. A

trickle of dirt cascaded from the interior. A hand reached out, clinging to the

edge of the clock. A scarred and very burnt hand, the flesh peeled from the bone,

veins popping from the hideously bloated fingers. Something decrepit stepped

out of the clock. Then, slowly, the antique vanished with a grinding noise. A

moment later the nursing home shivered, as though in fear. The figure gave a

hollow, resounding laugh.

The tears had come and Laura could not quell them. She guessed it must be

the shock. What had happened to the old woman? There was something coldly

disturbing about dolls, she thought, and their lifeless imitation of real breathing

people. But Mrs Monaghan had been a real breathing person, now turned into

something plastic, artificial, something with no meaning. Laura wiped her eyes,

got her breathing under control. She was a nurse, she had seen much worse than

this. She wished she wasn't the only one on duty. Indeed, Sheila should have

been here by now. Oh, God, what was she going to do?

'Hello? Are you all right?' asked a heavily accented female.

Laura looked up smartly. A young woman was standing in the doorway to

the nurses' station. She was dressed in a very tight, very short black miniskirt, a

vivid scarlet shirt with an over-sized collar, high heels, and, oddly, a black plastic

mac. She had strong, rather stern features, wide intelligent brown eyes, dark hair

done in a short boyish cut, and a mouth brightened with red lipstick. She held

two mugs of tea and cocked an eyebrow inquiringly.

For a moment Laura was so startled by this image that she couldn't speak.

Then, as if something clicked inside her, more tears began to pour out.

The woman rushed over. 'You're not all right,' she said, as though it were a

diagnosis. 'Here, have a cuppa. It'll make you feel better.' She pushed a mug into

Laura's hands.

Laura sipped, and, strangely, felt better right away. She enjoyed the warmth

of the mug on her palms.

'See,' said the woman. 'Always works.' She smiled a kind, genuine smile and

offered her hand. 'Hi, I'm Tegan. What's your name?'

Because she was so disarmed by the brusqueness of Tegan's approach, she

found herself replying automatically. 'Laura,' she said, and her hand was shaken

roughly by the other woman.

Taking a quick sip of her tea, Tegan looked at her and said, 'Now, Laura, how

about you tell me all about it.'

And Laura found herself telling the woman everything. About Mrs

Monaghan, the doll, even the patients' frequent claims of strange noises in the

night. She told her about the wiring problem, the need for constant vigilance

from the staff, even her wishes to get out of here one day and finish that course

in horticulture she had begun years ago. Tegan listened attentively and did not

question a single thing Laura said. Only when she had finished did the stylishly

attired woman speak. She was frowning. ‘I’d like you to show me where you

found this. . doll.’ She paused and swallowed nervously. ‘You see, if I think it’s

what it is, and I really hope it isn’t, then I’ve seen it before.’

Laura was surprised. ‘Really? Where? What does it mean?’ She found herself

becoming very anxious at that. But Tegan’s sturdiness and forthrightness was

something she could measure herself against and become stalwart.

But Tegan wouldn’t say. A haunted look had come into her eyes. She was

remembering something. Finally she spoke, her eyes widening with dismay. ‘It

means that he’s still alive. And we’re all in danger.’ She placed a hand on Laura’s

arm. ‘I have a friend I’d like you to meet.’

Looking at the Australian woman — she had finally figured out the accent —

she felt her doubt fall away in Tegan’s conviction. All right, she thought. At least

she wasn’t doing this alone any more.

She stood up, readying herself for action.

‘Ms Henderson?’ asked a voice from the doorway.

She flinched. Turned sharply. Relaxed somewhat. ‘Mr Burrows. Is there a

problem?’ It can’t possibly be as big as mine, she thought.

He shuffled his feet awkwardly, like a child, his pyjama bottoms riding high

up his ankles. ‘The boiler,’ he said, and his voice was fearful and scratchy. ‘It’s

making funny noises again.’

Instantly she was reminded of Mrs Monaghan’s similar worry. And the dread

came rushing back to her.

‘I think there’s someone down there,’ he said.

* * *

Turlough stirred his mashed potato desultorily, pushed the peas round his

plate. This kind of food reminded him too much of Brendon School. Mess Hall

dinners. Mass-produced stodge. The roast beef was so tough he could have

mistaken it for rubber. The peeling, sickly green wallpaper didn’t help dispense

the illusion, nor the clackety hard steel chairs and tables of the dining room. Or

perhaps it was just him?

The Doctor was happily devouring his meal with great gusto. He took a swig

of his juice, glanced at Turlough. ‘You’re not eating?’

Not that, thank you,' he replied.

The Doctor shrugged and transferred plates, dropping his own empty one in

front of Turlough. 'It's good for you, you know. You'll need the energy.'

'Why?' he asked stubbornly.

'We may have to leave quickly. Running could be involved.'

Turlough frowned. 'You still think the Master may have left booby traps?'

The Doctor raised an eyebrow. 'Don't you?' He sighed. 'I know him. We were

rather alike when we were at school together.' He was suddenly crestfallen.

'After all this feuding, it's strange to think that he has finally gone. I had hoped

that one day I might get through to him. To my old friend, buried deep in there.'

He frowned at his unfortunate wording.

'This has been difficult for you, we know.'

'Yes, I suppose it has. I've never liked goodbyes.'

'So what do we do now?' Turlough almost smiled at the question. They had

found nothing of consequence in the Master's room. A few scientific magazines

— one bookmarked with a newspaper advertisement for masquerade costume

hire, 'all tastes catered for' — Holst's *The Planets* on compact disc, a small brass

telescope and a shaving mirror. The black velvet costume, limp as a hooked fish,

had been the only evidence the Master had occupied the space. He was a solitary

individual, composed only of himself. Turlough almost felt sympathy for his last

lonely days spent in this sterile, exile environment. Almost.

The Doctor's fork clattered on the plate, done with the meal. He turned to his

companion. 'I think it's time we found out from the other patients what the

Master was like during his final days.'

'I doubt he was very sociable,' replied Turlough scathingly.

Will you —' The Doctor visibly restrained himself. He'd been prone to these

small fits of temper recently. 'Just see what you can find out, okay? I'd like to

know.'

'What exactly?'

'What he was doing here. And what he did with his TARDIS.' His tone was

dark at that.

'And how will these people be able to help us?' Turlough gestured to them

dismissively.

The Doctor shook his head and tsked. 'You've clearly never had a

grandparent, Turlough. The elderly are prone to a good bit of gossip.' He looked

around at the patients slurping and gabbling at the table. 'I expect they know

absolutely everything there is to know about what's going on here.'

“Scuse me?’ asked a croaky voice from behind them. ‘You’re new ‘ere, aren’t

you?’

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They swivelled in their seats. An elderly man in a dressing gown was peering

down at them hawkishly. The Doctor beamed at him. ‘Yes, we are. New recruits.

This is Turlough, and I’m the Doctor.’

‘Oh, you’re the new fellow?’ enquired the old man. ‘Been expecting you, they

‘ave. Bit late, aren’t ya?’

Turlough stifled a smile. The Doctor noticed and frowned petulantly at him.

‘Ah, yes... a little. My schedule keeps me rather busy. Actually, we’re here to take

care of a particular patient. I wonder if you remember him? He was buried

today.’

The old man’s eyebrows went up in surprise. ‘Not much you can do for ‘im,

then, I ‘spose.’

The Doctor smiled politely. ‘Not in the medical sense, no.’

“E the one with the burns? Stayed in his room a lot?’

Turlough piped up. ‘That could be him.’

The Doctor pounced on the description. ‘Burns? Had he been injured?’

The man creased up his brows. “Spose so. I never had a chance to ask ‘im.’ He

gazed myopically at the Time Lord. ‘Shouldn’t you knows this, bein’ ‘is doctor

an’ all?’

The Doctor looked sheepish. ‘Unfortunately I never got to see the body. I was

called in at too late a stage, you see.’ He perked up. ‘I did read the report on the

deceased, though. Natural causes, apparently.’

‘Ironic, considering it wasn’t his body at all,’ said Turlough sarcastically.

The Doctor ignored him and went on. ‘So no one saw hide nor hair of him

while he was here?’

‘Part from his specialist.’ The old man began to shuffle his feet, glanced up at

the TV in the corner of the room.

‘His specialist?’

‘Mr Tase. Head of the home. Now, ‘scuse me, but my programme’s startin’

and I always watch it every week. Nice to meet yous. ‘Spose I’ll see you round.’

‘Yes,’ said the Doctor politely, then, ‘Well, that was interesting.’

‘Hmm,’ Turlough agreed. ‘Fascinating character. Full of pertinent

information.’

‘You know, sometimes I think you actually dislike travelling with me,

Turlough,’ he said provocatively.

‘Sorry, Doctor, I’m just not very keen on this place. It feels. . wrong.’

‘I know what you mean. It does seem oddly familiar.’ The Doctor

looked at

him, concerned. Then he relented. ‘All right. I’ll have a quick chat with this Mr

Tase, just to reassure myself, and then we’ll head back to the TARDIS. How does

that sound?’

But Turlough wasn’t listening. He had been watching the old man stagger to

the television set and turn it on with the remote. An older set, it had taken a

moment to warm up, a fizz of ozone in the air. ‘Perhaps you were right, Doctor,’

he said.

The Doctor looked up at the face of the television high up in the corner of the

room. A dulled image appeared, the picture filled with noise. It seemed to be a

situation comedy, judging by the laughter track and the fast-paced edits. What

was worrying was that he recognised the actors. For each and every one of them

had the saturnine, goateed face of the Master.

‘Well, there’s no one here now,’ said Tegan, both relieved and exasperated.

The boiler room may have seemed empty, but it hummed with power, the pipes

overhead pumping water, the great round steel boiler throbbing with an evident

raw energy. The fire inside threw out a menacing red glow through the glass

plate. Nevertheless, Tegan was tense and expectant. There was something

wrong, she felt.

Laura stepped down the last of the stairs, footsteps reverberating unnaturally.

‘Everything seems normal. That’s the usual sound the boiler makes.’

‘What’s through there?’ asked Tegan, pointing to a dark room beyond the

machine.

The nurse shivered and wrapped her arms about herself. ‘That’s a mortuary.

When one of the patients dies we sometimes put them down here for safe-

keeping before the designated funeral home picks them up.’

‘Bit morbid, don’t you think? Putting them in the cellar.’

Laura shrugged. ‘It was Mr Tase’s idea. The head of the home.’ She gave the

room a quick look. ‘There’s nothing here. Can we go back now?’

‘Hang on,’ said Tegan and went forward to the boiler. ‘Or don’t you listen to

your patients, even when they’re obviously very frightened?’

‘They have been complaining more than usual,’ Laura replied, and frowned.

‘Strange disturbances, that sort of thing.’

‘I’m not surprised,’ said Tegan humourlessly. ‘Things tend to go a bit funny

when the Master’s around.’

‘The man you told me about?’

‘Yes. Though what’s worrying me is that he’s supposed to be dead. We

attended his funeral this afternoon.’ She glanced back at Laura to show her she

was serious, and to make sure the nurse was still capable. ‘I just want to check

the boiler…’ she said. Looking about, she found an oily rag hanging on a pipe

above her. Winding it around the hot handle, she took hold and twisted. The

door opened easily and furious heat surged out. Tegan took a step back at the

intensity.

After a moment, when she grew accustomed to the warmth, she bent and

peered inside the fat boiler. She gasped aloud when she saw what was inside.

‘You’d better have a look at this,’ she said in a tone that brooked no argument.

Laura quickly came to join her, and looked inside. Within the flames there

were a number of tiny bodies, their clothes shrivelling, skin crisping. Underneath

the intense heat was a smell of hair burning. Tegan retched, remembering how

her Aunty Vanessa had met a similar fate. Laura squealed.

Then the boiler started making a horrid groaning sound, as though it were

having trouble digesting. Tegan slammed the door shut, burning herself; she

cried out. A figure stepped out from behind the machine. In the sick-red glow,

Tegan could make out hideously scarred features, flesh cauterised into an ugly

burnt approximation of a face; teeth leered over the gums, eyes boggled insanely.

Laura began to scream. Darkness flowed from the figure in waves. It reached out

a hand to them and Tegan recognised the device it held. A slim black rod with a

flowering end.

‘You,’ she said, appalled.

The figure laughed — a smooth, sinister chuckle — and pressed the trigger on

the device.

The Doctor had been all set for a confrontation with the elusive Mr Tase in his

office when Turlough had reminded him of Tegan. He’d stopped in his tracks,

sheepish that he hadn’t thought of her whereabouts or safety until that moment.

He’d quickly shifted gears, and gone in search of the nurses’ station, which had

been resolutely empty and unhelpful. The manor was eerily quiet. They had

searched for a patient to ask, but no one seemed to be around. Fortunately, they

had come across one old man wandering the corridors, who had complained

about the boiler making strange noises, and explained that he'd made the same

declaration an hour ago to Nurse Henderson and her pretty Australian friend.

And then the Doctor had uttered those words that Turlough so disliked. 'Let's

split up.'

'Do you really think that's a good idea?' he'd offered.

'Oh, I should think it's me he's after, not you,' the Doctor had said casually.

'That makes me feel so much better.' The Doctor had noted his sarcasm.

'Yes, well, be careful in any case. Who knows what things the Master keeps in

his cellar.' He'd reached into his pocket and withdrawn an odd but now familiar

silver shape hanging on a chain. 'The TAU'S key, if things get really nasty.'

'Doctor.. ' Turlough had protested. 'What if Tegan's not down there?'

'She will be,' he'd said decisively, patting his companion on the back. 'You'll

be fine.' Then, already preoccupied with finding Mr Tase, he had dashed off

down the threadbare corridor. Turlough had watched his coat tails disappear

with a rising sense of unease.

Now, he'd reached the end of the stairs. His cautious progress had seemed as

slow as an age. 'Tegan?' he called out in a mouse of a voice. It had to have been

the basement, he thought ruefully.

The room was swathed in a sickly red light emanating from the fire in the

boiler itself. There was an uncomfortably warm subterranean gloom. He quickly

passed the boiler and, finding the dark room behind it, went through. ‘Tegan?’

he whispered fiercely. The boiler clanked behind him, causing him to leap a mile

in the air. Then it settled; the place was charged with expectant energy. The

hackles went up on the back of his neck and he whimpered, hating the sound of

it. The quiet was that of something waiting in the shadows. He wasn’t going to

say it but he couldn’t resist. ‘Is anyone there?’ Nothing replied.

His torch picked out metal cupboards and two fat slabs in its actinic light. It

looked like a morgue. His anxiety went up a notch. There was clearly no one

here. So obviously he was going to have to check the morgue drawers, a silver

wall with handles. He reached out and took hold of one, flinching at the cold

steel. Gritting his teeth, he pulled the drawer. It slid open smoothly and smacked

to a fast stop when it was fully extended. It was also empty. He felt better about

that. There were still five to go.

Just when he thought he was going to find them all empty, his luck ran out.

Tegan was in the fourth. Someone had wrapped her carefully in the long, black

plastic mac she had been wearing. Its similarity to a body-bag was disturbing.

Turlough leapt into action. He gently slapped her cold, pale face. She looked

drained in the torchlight. ‘Tegan? Tegan, wake up!’ He was aware of how loud

his voice had become, aware of the shadows lengthening in the light. He swung

round; his peripheral vision blinked as though someone had been standing there,

watching him. He was sweating heavily. He didn’t have time for gentility. He

slapped Tegan hard across the face, trying not to enjoy it too much.

Wha.. !’ She spluttered awake. He helped her to sit up. Her eyes goggled for a

moment, then settled on him. ‘Turlough! Thank goodness you’re here! It’s him!

It’s the Master, he’s —’

‘Not dead.’ He nodded. ‘Yes, we know.’

She frowned. ‘Did you just slap me?’ Her strident tone was cutting. Turlough

cleared his throat, stifling a smile. ‘Come on, let’s get out of here.’

‘Where’s the Doctor?’ she asked.

‘Gone to see the Head about how things are run around here.’ He gave an

ironic pout. ‘I imagine he’ll be needing our help quite soon.’

Tegan gasped aloud, swung herself off the steel drawer. Wait! I just

remembered. It wasn't our Master!'

Turlough frowned. 'What are you talking about? Are you all right?'

'Fine, thanks,' she said brusquely. Snatching his torch, she strode into the

boiler room. Turlough found her poking around near the big round steel

machine. 'It was a cadaver, a corpse. But he had the Master's weapon.'

'The TCE?'

'Yes. And he had dolls of the patients, and he was burning them!' She closed

her eyes for a second to forget the image. 'It was horrible.' She looked at

Turlough and could see he was dubious. Unable to find the rag, she bunched up

the material of her shirt and used it to shield her hand from the heat as she

opened the door. 'Go on, look,' she said, her eyes turned away. 'Laura's gone in

there.' There was a tear in her voice.

Turlough bent down and peered into the cavernous interior, flames crackling

and writhing. A terrible stench drifted from the boiler in waves. At first he saw

nothing, but then he made out tiny limbs — legs and feet, shoes melting. His

eyes ranged over these, and he found to his horror that at waist height every tiny

figurine had become a white, chiselled Ionic column. And as they burned down,

the coals they became looked exactly like... It was then that he suddenly realised.

'I think we're in bigger trouble than I'd thought,' he said.

Which was when four pyjama-attired patients suddenly appeared from the

dark and surrounded them. Their faces were blank and chilling, hypnotised. In

one hand they held needles, scalpels, sharp medical implements intended to

harm. In the other, each held the tiny corpse of a nurse.

The Doctor had arrived at the Head's office. Surprisingly, it had been difficult

to find, situated as it was at the top of the building. As though he hadn't wanted

to be disturbed, which only strengthened the Doctor's suspicions. Emblazened

on the door in large black letters were the words 'GENERAL MANAGER'. It was

enough to frighten any poor patient away. The Doctor reached out and knocked

boldly.

'Come,' said a masterful voice from within. He entered cautiously.

Inside, the room was dark, small, yet decorated lavishly in an oak-panelled

dado. There was a bookcase filled with medical journals against one wall, and a

verdigris chaise longue against the other. Along the back wall there was a desk,

scattered importantly with piles of papers, as though to give credence to its

purpose as the hub of the home. A lamp cast a gentle glow across it. A high-

backed swivel chair faced away from him.

The Doctor cleared his throat. ‘You can stop hiding behind façades. I’m here

now. And I want some answers, *Mr Tase*.’

A deep-throated, gloating chuckle beyond the chair. A burnt, skinless hand

flopped down over the side. ‘My dear Doctor...’ That soft, hypnotic voice he

remembered. ‘You have been so relentlessly predictable. It’s almost been

disappointing.’

‘Yes, I have been rather too careless.’

‘But you had to be sure,’ said the Master and there was amusement in his

tone. ‘I knew you’d come for that reason alone.’

The Doctor sighed, angry that he’d been duped. ‘Why are you doing this? Is it

another of your schemes for dominion? Or did you just want to humiliate me

before planning my no doubt complicated death?’

There was a slight pause. ‘This may surprise you, Doctor,’ said the silky

voice, ‘but I don’t want to kill you. This time.’

The Doctor frowned. ‘Then the patients. . What have you done with them?’

‘Euthanised them,’ said the Master coldly. ‘You see, *I’m* the doctor here.’

The Doctor was horrified. ‘That wasn’t necessary!’

‘Oh, but it was, Doctor, it was. Through their deaths they’re helping me.’ He

chuckled evilly. ‘Just as you will agree to help me.’ At this, the black leather chair

swivelled around dramatically — to reveal the cloaked remnants of a decayed,

withered man. Eyes leered and lips jutted obscenely; the skin had peeled and

stretched, only veins and organs showed, somehow existing.

The Doctor was shocked at this vision, and yet his natural compassion

reigned at the pain the Master must be in. It certainly explained his madness.

He’d never expected to see this incarnation again. But... No. His natural Time

Lord instinct recognised that this was his Master, the one who had stolen Nyssa’s

father’s body for his own. He straightened, suddenly in the superior position.

‘Well, well, you do seem to be in quite a spot of bother this time. You look like

you should have stayed six feet under. What happened? One of your traps

backfire on you?’

The Master hissed. ‘The Time Lords did this to me. Because of you.’ He

creaked forward in his chair. ‘I advise you to take this very seriously. And your

mocking humour will *not* be tolerated.’

The Doctor lay back on the chaise longue, stretching himself out, unworried.

‘What makes you think I’d help you?’

The Master smiled thinly as much as he could, and brought up a slim black

rod with a flowering end. ‘This mainly,’ he said. ‘And...’

The door opened and Tegan and Turlough were shunted in, followed by the

gaggle of on-edge patients, needles and scalpels poised. The Doctor carefully

stood up.

‘And them,’ finished the Master, motioning to the companions with his TCE.

‘Doctor!’ yelled Tegan shrilly. ‘Are you all right?’

‘Fine, Tegan, fine. You’re not hurt?’ She shook her head.

The Master looked them over with a sneer. ‘The redoubtable Doctor’s

companions. Now that we’re all here, I have a nice trip planned for all of us.

Doctor?’ His mad eyes stared at the Time Lord.

‘Doctor! You can’t be helping him.’

He glanced at Tegan, frustrated. ‘Who said I was?’

‘Doctor,’ said Turlough calmly. None of this is real.’

‘That’s right,’ put in Tegan. ‘We found black roundels in the boiler. He’s

using the patients as fuel for his —’

‘TARDIS,’ finished the Doctor.

‘You knew?’ Turlough was incredulous at the Doctor’s lack of trust.

‘I had my suspicions. I didn’t find the sitcom funny for one.’ Throughout, the

Doctor had remained between his companions and the Master, perfectly still and

composed. The TCE was point-blank on his hearts. ‘It’s an old trick of the

Master’s: materialise his TARDIS around the real object, absorb it, and control

everything within.’

The Master grimaced, his face ripping with the action. ‘Well done, but I’m

afraid this charade has come to an end. Doctor? Shall we?’ Without waiting for

confirmation, the Master pressed a button on his desk console.

Tegan pulled free from her elderly captor. ‘No! You can’t. I won’t let you

harm any more patients.’

‘Tegan!’ yelled the Doctor and he moved to intercept her. There was a

kerfuffle of kicks and scrapes and shouting. The TCE bloomed with a circle of

red light. Then the entire nursing home vanished with a wheezing, groaning

noise, like an expiring patient.

It was a forest of bare, gnarled trees, fingers tangling each other up as though

constantly fighting. They made a sinister, hollow clacking noise as the wind

rubbed them together. It was a forest filled with fairytale dark, a haven for who

knew what manner of devious, harmful beasts.

A sound rent the air, intruding upon the stillness. And then an Elizabethan

manor, all half-timbered and mossy, shimmered into existence, somehow

managing to fit itself among the close-knit trees. After a moment, the manor

shivered and in a swift movement folded itself into a small rectangle and was

suddenly a grandfather clock. The clock shivered again, and then, deciding this

was the correct form to assume in this place, solidified. Time started with a great

clunk from the pendulum. Five people stepped out of the clock.

* * *

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Tegan left the TARDIS first, with two patients chaperoning; then the Doctor,

seeming very cowed and drawn, and lastly the Master, covering him with the

rude black device.

‘Excellent, we’ve arrived,’ said the Master. ‘I trust no more demonstrations of

power will be needed to ensure your cooperation, Doctor?’

‘I would have helped you anyway,’ he replied, dejected.

‘You would have strung me along until you found a way to thwart me. I

know you of old, Doctor.’ He chuckled. ‘This way I have some insurance.’ With a

free hand he took out a small snuffbox and opened it. Inside lay the miniaturised

form of Turlough, black coat making him seem like a caught furry bug. The small

boy glanced up fearfully at the looming disfigured terror. Tegan could vaguely

hear his tiny shouts for help.

‘If you harm a hair on his head...’

‘I don’t think you’re in any position to threaten me, Doctor.’ The Master

snapped the box shut, and rattled it for good measure, smirking. The

Doctor took

a step forward. The Master shoved the TCE directly in his face. ‘Careful, Doctor,’

he said, amused.

‘Look, I don’t know what you want me to do, but I will do anything I can to

help you!’ The Doctor’s voice became raised with desperation. ‘I give you my

word. And when we’re done you will return Turlough to his normal size and we

will go our separate ways. I will not attempt to stop you.’ The Doctor looked

agonised.

The Master looked down at the box, considering. Finally he relented. ‘Very

well.’ The box went back into a fold of his tattered cloak. The Master gestured

magnanimously with the TCE. ‘After you, my dear Doctor.’

They trudged through the dim forest for seemingly hours, the trees looming

grotesquely over them, obstructing their passage with sharp twiggy fingers,

tripping them with thick roots. Animals cried somewhere in the darkness. To

Tegan each step was laboured; she felt weak with exertion and a terrible

knowledge that Turlough’s condition was her fault. She looked at the Doctor. He

hadn’t spoken to her. His voice when the Master had picked up their friend had

been a broken, empty sound. He'd muttered, 'Not again.' She'd only been

slightly relieved when the Master revealed he'd changed the setting and that

Turlough was still alive. He'd squeezed the doll, and then every card was in his

hand. The Doctor had given in because of her; her stupid impetuosity had almost

got Turlough killed and had placed them all in the Master's power. She carefully

manoeuvred herself next to the Doctor, her captors shifting position as she did

so. Will he be all right?' she asked gingerly.

The Doctor looked into her. 'I don't know, Tegan. I hope so.' She felt even

more guilty at that.

'You can't really mean to help him?' she asked candidly, her faith in him

undiminished.

His look was one of utter defeat. 'What choice do I have?' he said sadly.

The Master, listening in, chuckled. 'None if you want to play with your friend

again,' he said cruelly. 'We're here.'

Tegan looked up and her mouth dropped open. The forest had suddenly

opened out into a clearing and before them stood an enormous Gothic castle of

black stone, with crumbling turrets and battlements, a drawbridge and a moat.

‘That’s a little incongruous,’ remarked the Doctor.

‘Not for a prison,’ spat the Master.

‘Ah,’ replied the Doctor. ‘This whole fiasco is beginning to make sense.’

‘Not to me,’ said Tegan stroppishly. ‘And I don’t see why we had to walk all

the way here when we could have used his TARDIS.’

‘Because, my dear Ms Jovanka, I don’t plan on letting certain powers-that-be

know that I can escape.’

‘But only within a limited range?’ asked the Doctor, curiosity piqued now he

had parts of the puzzle to play with.

‘My TARDIS was able to fix upon one planet only.’ The Master was very

bitter about the fact.

‘Let me guess.’ The Doctor clearly enjoyed teasing his enemy. ‘Earth.’

‘That backward, benighted planet. The people are centuries old and yet still

haven’t crawled from the mineral slime technologically or intellectually.’

‘And, of course, these powers-that-be watch Earth constantly for signs of

interference.’

The Master smirked. ‘Yes. The only benefit was that I was assured of

ensnaring you, Doctor.’ He prodded the Time Lord with the TCE. ‘Enough talk.

Inside.’

Tegan’s two captors shuffled her along as well, needles ready to prick at the

slightest sign of resistance.

Inside, the castle was a nightmare. After the relatively normal stone

courtyard, they travelled down corridors padded with black studded leather.

Spikes of sharp steel ran along the ceiling in a complex webbing, drawing them

in to the centre. Night-black artworks hung on the walls with slashes of bright,

bloody colour. Tegan tried not to look at them. She imagined she saw the

paintings writhe, figures leering out at her with sinister grimaces.

‘You can tell a lot about a man by the art he collects,’ murmured the Doctor

worriedly.

Mannequins with velvet masks, each clothed in the Master’s black, decadent

costume appeared at every turn, startling Tegan. She took hold of the Doctor’s

arm.

‘Brave heart, Tegan,’ he said, but he didn’t sound so sure himself.

Eventually, they arrived in the throne room. It alone was covered entirely in

luxurious black velvet. Along two walls were rows of grotesque, seemingly

melted mirrors. There was a single object at the back of the room, covered with a

red silk sheet. And at the far end of the room on a metal throne shaped into a

rising phoenix sat a dark-clad figure in a monk's robe. The hood covered the

head and was brocaded around the tip. The figure stood and spread his arms.

'Why, Doctor, I'm so glad you could join me.'

The Doctor sniffed. 'I should have guessed.' He glanced at the fixed grimace

of the Master behind him. 'So which one is the real you?'

The figure chuckled evilly and motioned them forward. As they passed

through the room, Tegan noticed frightening dark terrors seething and bulging

from every mirror. At the foot of the dais they looked up at the Master. 'How I

have longed for this moment, Doctor. When I am the ruler and you are the

ruled.'

'Are you going to tell me why I have to help you, or shall we play a few more

games?' Tegan was shocked at the real anger in the Doctor's tone.

'This is why you have to help me,' replied the Master bitterly. And he

removed the cowl. Where his head should have been there was only deep,

frightening darkness.

Quite characteristically, the Master explained everything.

'So you didn't escape this time,' said the Doctor wryly.

‘I went to Gallifrey to help you, Doctor,’ he said with iron in his tone. ‘Begged

by the Time Lords to rescue you and your past selves from the Death Zone. They

promised me forgiveness. A new regenerative cycle.’ He paused and then spat,

‘But they exiled me instead!’

They had ripped his last body from him, and he had only managed to hold on

to himself with a barely conceivable strength of will. He consisted only of dark

now. He had raged at the indignity of it all, at the unfairness.

‘Who are you to talk about unfairness?’ cried the Doctor, hard-eyed. ‘I’ve

learned all about it here,’ the Master replied.

The devious and fickle Time Lords had placed him here where no one would

find him, where he would live out a meagre existence, if he could. They took

back his TARDIS and tried to reprogram her. But she remembered him, searched

him out. He had been so relieved when he’d found the old grandfather clock in

the woods one day. Unfortunately he had not been able to cross the threshold,

some limiting program that held. He’d pushed and pushed, and had nearly died

in the attempt. But to his amazement, when he came to, he’d been confronted by

the deathly grinning visage of his last life. His TARDIS had created a construct

which was, in some sense, his Watcher, a form he could manipulate and, partly,

inhabit. He'd realised how he could use it as a vessel. So he sent it in his TARDIS

to watch for advantages, to search for help. He'd almost despaired when he

learned that it could only manage the jump to Earth. Occasionally it brought him

humans, apparently intelligent. They whimpered and he usually killed them.

Then, he'd seen the advantage he had in his knowledge of the blue planet. And

he had formulated a crafty, elaborate plan to ensnare his best enemy. They had

been friends once. This time the Doctor would help him.

So he had waited for the Doctor. And the Doctor had come.

'Well, now you know what it's like,' said the Doctor childishly. 'Having a

whole universe at hand, and then having it taken away from you.'

'With your help, I shall be getting it back.'

'Going against the Time Lords is very dangerous! I should know.'

'Rubbish!' yelled the Master angrily. 'They let you go about doing your

impossible acts of goodness. You're a political expediency, Doctor. They

wouldn't waste the energy to hunt you down.'

'You don't understand. I *don't know* how to help you.' His brow cracked, face

fell. The blackness within the cowl swirled, perhaps a smile. ‘That’s all right,

Doctor.’ He paused. ‘I do.’

The Doctor was instantly alarmed. ‘Then why the explanations?’

The Master shrugged. ‘I like the game.’ And with that, he pulsed with a surge

of energy, and two bolts of dark flew from his head. One went into Tegan, who

was thrown across the room. The other was absorbed by the silent, immobile

Watcher Master. It happened so quickly, so unexpectedly. The Doctor turned to

help Tegan. And the real Master placed a bag over his head and pulled the cord

tight about his neck.

When the Doctor awoke he found he’d been tied. He was able to turn his

head. He looked about. He was still in the throne room, atop a cold metal bench.

Judging from the position, it was the object that had been covered by the red

velvet. Typically showy of the Master to glamorise his torture device. He was

secured by thick leather straps.

‘Ah, Doctor, I’m glad you’re awake. I wouldn’t want you to miss the show.

Particularly as you’re the star.’

He struggled, just to see how well his limbs had been tied. Expertly, it

seemed. ‘It’s no use struggling,’ said the Master with particular relish.

‘What are you planning to do?’ The Doctor finally discerned the dark figure

standing just beyond the foot of the slab.

‘I need a corporeal body, Doctor. This dark is merely what I could remember.’

There was a terrible pause. ‘So I’m going to steal one of your lives.’ He stopped

to let the fact register, like a man who has perfected his megalomaniacal

statements. ‘There may even be enough of a connection between us for me to

reoccupy a physical resemblance of my old body.’

‘Don’t be stupid!’ yelled the Doctor, desperation creeping in. ‘It won’t work.’

‘We shall certainly give it a try,’ said the Master, chuckling.

‘I’ll stop you.’ There was righteous indignation in the Doctor’s tone.

‘Tied up like that? I think not. No, Doctor, this time I have won.’ He took out

the tin snuffbox and shook it about. ‘I really wonder how much you value the

lives of your companions to make such inflammatory statements.’

The Doctor glared at him, lips trembling. ‘Don’t,’ he said.

The blackness swirled in the Master’s hood. ‘Speaking of companions, meet

my latest.’ He gestured and a figure walked into the Doctor’s sight.

‘Oh, no.’ There was real despair in his tone. ‘Not you, Tegan.’

It was his companion, and yet transformed. She wore a voluminous black

velvet gown, the skirt hooped and billowing around her slight form,

the bodice

tightly fitted to her chest, long black gloves etched with gold filigree on the cuffs

and the fingertips, and an intricate brocaded collar a mirror image to the

Master's velvet costume. Over her face she wore a black lace veil, her lips

looming vivid red behind it, and behind her lay a crushed velvet train almost the

length of the entire room. She was his bride, wed to the darkness.

The Doctor closed his eyes at her terrible transformation.

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'Doesn't she fit the part beautifully?' The Master stroked her velvet collar

lovingly. He lifted her veil.

'Let her go,' urged the Doctor. 'You don't need her!'

'Oh, but I do, Doctor. She's going to play the part of your executioner.' The

Master reached down. Something metal scraped along the stone. The Doctor

blanched when he saw what it was. A metre-long, gleaming metal spike,

geometrically perfected and smooth, a ball at the other end. The Master ran his

gloved hands along it appreciatively. 'It's magnificent.' He handed it to Tegan.

She took it without a word; her blank eyes remained on the Doctor at all times.

'Now, let's begin!' pronounced the Master. He walked away.

With a clunk of mechanics and a grinding, the slab began to lift sluggishly

from its horizontal position. The Doctor felt his weight shift, the straps cut in

painfully to hold him upright. Once vertical, the slab twisted sideways and

anchored itself in the stone again. The Doctor was now directly facing the throne

at the other end of the room. In between, lay the mirrors, six either side. He

suddenly realised how the Master intended to do this. Twelve mirrors in total; 12

regenerations. He couldn't just steal a regeneration from a Time Lord, he had to

channel it through all his previous lives until it came to what he was now. It was

quite a risk, but also quite ingenious. The Master had lost none of his cruelty or

shrewdness. He realised with horror that this might actually work.

Tegan stood before him, rigid as a spear. He had to break through the

conditioning. 'Tegan, I know you're probably angry at me right now. But it's the

Master who's doing that. He's tapped into your resentment and frustration

towards me.' He stared point-blank into her eyes. 'Please listen to me, Tegan.

Concentrate on my voice. It's the Doctor, your friend. You must concentrate to

break his hold. Please, Tegan. .' *Keep saying her name.* 'Tegan—'

The Master shouted at him from the other end of the room. 'It's no good,

Doctor. You never were very good at breaking my conditioning.' He pressed a

button on his throne.

The floor shuddered, and a stone slid away beside the Doctor. An enormous

birdcage rose out of it amid steam. It was a twisted metal thing, with hundreds

of sharp metal thorns on each bar. In it was a patient, naked but for a wide strip

of studded leather about his middle. The Doctor could see the same was

happening at the other end of the room. Hurriedly, Tegan secured it to his slab

with rubber hoses, metal clamps. Conduits, he thought, so his previous selves

couldn't snatch away the regeneration. The Master had thought of everything.

'Excellent,' hissed the black robed figure. 'There's only one thing to do.' With

that he sat back on his throne and beckoned to the grotesque, decrepit form of his

Watcher. The burnt figure slowly took the steps to the throne and sat down. For

a moment there existed two Masters in the chair, and there was an amount of

thrashing as though one did not want to be absorbed. A wave of blackness

flowed from the cloak and into the perpetually grinning figure. And then there

was only the Watcher. He quickly shrugged on the cloak. 'Now, my dear,' he

said to Tegan, and his voice runnelled down the room, ‘take his life.’

‘Tegan! Wait!’

But she had already brought up the metal spike. She placed it against his left

heart. The Doctor took a breath.

Tegan drove the spike into his chest, puncturing his heart.

The pain was immense, like a sun had gone supernova in his body. The heat

flowed out of him. The Doctor gritted his teeth against it. Sweat stood out on his

forehead. His face felt cold. He could feel a great part of him pushing against the

metal intruder in his body. Tegan was holding it in.

Through the white-hot burning sensation, he heard the Master say, ‘Now,

remove the pin.’

‘No, please,’ the Doctor gasped.

Tegan plucked it out. The surge of energy flew from him, throwing his

companion across the stone floor. It charged down the rubber hose into the cage

and into the poor patient kept there. His life force tossed and threw the human

about like a ragdoll, burning him beyond recognition. He was unable to hold it.

But then he wasn’t supposed to. The Doctor could only watch, broken and

helpless, as it travelled like electricity into the first of the mirrors. The

glass

warped and bent as the Master within tried to grasp it. But it quickly leapt to the

next, crackling and arching between opposite mirrors, leaving anguished cries

behind. For one moment it didn't seem as though the final mirror would let it go,

but then it leapt into the conduit, the patient frying and growing with enormous

energy. As soon as he fell it shot straight into the Master on his throne. He

seethed and hissed with electricity, his body steaming and crackling. The metal

phoenix behind the throne, wings spread grandly, watched the Master's rebirth

from the shadow.

The Doctor, bound, watched all this with chagrin. Tegan's body on the stone

was contorted. The Master writhed on his throne. The mirrors grasped and

thrashed. He wanted to yell with anger. Yes, of course, he thought. He knew how

to stop this. He wouldn't let the Master win, not like this. He summoned reserves

of strength he barely knew he possessed. Then he opened his mouth and he

screamed. It wasn't a normal scream. It registered in octaves that human ears

could not hear. The scream spiralled out into the room like a lethal arrow.

Every single mirror exploded, spraying shards of glass. Dark forms

flowed

out of them. They headed straight for the throne.

‘No!’ yelled the Master, as they took hold of him. ‘It’s mine!’

The Doctor watched as the darkness swelled until the throne was covered in a

cloud of buzzing black. Something pushed itself out of the Master.

It shot across the room, poured itself back into the Doctor, and struck him

into unconsciousness.

Later, when Tegan had released him from the slab, and they had restored a

very disgruntled, bruised Turlough to size, they stood around and wondered

what to do with the Master.

‘Leave him for the Time Lords,’ Turlough suggested nastily.

‘I can’t do that,’ said the Doctor. ‘I know what exile is like. I can’t blame him

for trying.’

‘He tried to kill you!’ said Tegan in disbelief, and there was anguish in her

eyes for her part played; he’d have to be gentle with her.

‘No, he didn’t,’ he corrected her. ‘He tried to steal one of my remaining lives.’

He looked down at the velvet-clad man. Those saturnine features and that

trimmed goatee were unmistakable.

‘You can’t defend him! Not after all this!’ Turlough was upset; being

shrunk

and kept in a snuffbox had not humbled his attitude.

‘I’m not defending him,’ said the Doctor, his voice raised. Tut I do

understand him.’ He shook his head. ‘And admire him to an extent.’ Tegan

hurrumphed. ‘The strength of will he must have to combat all his previous

regenerations and win, that’s formidable.’

‘He still stole your life. That’s one fewer for you.’ Tegan pulled at her velvet

gloves guiltily. She no doubt wanted to remove the disturbing outfit.

The Doctor managed a smile. ‘Actually, he stole a small piece from every one

of his past regenerations. That’s what maintained him.’ He tapped both his

hearts. ‘I think I’m all still here. Quite healed.’ He paused to consider. ‘And if I

didn’t know better, I’d suspect he knew that this wouldn’t work. That he

expected to lose. It rejected him, you see.’

‘Perhaps he likes to lose,’ remarked Turlough, sharing a covert glance with

the Doctor.

There was a wheezing groaning noise that echoed throughout the padded

room. A grandfather clock materialised in the centre of the room. ‘Just in time,’

murmured the Doctor. ‘We’ve got a whole nursing home and some very

confused patients to get back to Earth.'

'And what are you going to do with him?' asked Turlough, nodding at the

velvet man on the floor.

The Doctor's companions turned to him as one for his decision. It felt good to

have them back again, their trust complete in him. 'I don't know,' he said. Tut I'll

think of something.' His smile was a little too wicked.

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Life After Queth

Matt Kimpton

An Adventure of the Fifth Doctor,

with Tegan Jovanka

Queth lurched towards its fate, threading an n-dimensional line through existence

towards its inevitable termination.

Of course, in another, rather more accurate sense, it did no such thing. The idea is

frankly asinine. There can be, by definition, no change in n-dimensional phase-space,

where time is just another unchanging axis, the infinity of events a static block of fact,

the marvellous tracery of the universe fixed and complete. There is no movement. No

was, will or could be. Only is.

This is why phase-space is so dull.

Nevertheless, the world moved. As the plane of the present slewed on

through the slab

of history —for all that neither of them existed or did any such thing — the planet edged

ever closer to its destiny. And then, some would say, a box appeared. This too is patently

drivel. Things can't appear in phase-space. They're either there or not.

Nevertheless — the box appeared. This is why real life is so exciting.

'Extraordinary! What's this green stuff?' asked the woodlouse.

'Moss,' said Tegan wearily. She'd said a lot of things wearily recently, from

'Just a wall' to 'Roundels, apparently' to 'I don't know, leave it alone', all of

which were apparently desperately exciting to their current, hopefully soon-to-

be-ex, passenger.

Oh, yes. *Passenger*. Their hideous, alien, gravity-controlling insect passenger,

which had tried to kill all of them on Frontios, and which the Doctor had

viciously dealt with by inviting it into the TARDIS and giving it a lift somewhere

else.

The thing gaped at her, antennae quivering in excitement. 'Moss! What is

moss?'

'Well, not this, if we're going to be technical,' came a distracted-sounding

voice from somewhere in the vicinity of Tegan's knees. 'I'd have said more of a

liverwort, really. See the rhizoids? Very simple structure. No sign of

protonemata, either, although that could be the time of year...'

Tegan glanced down. The Doctor was kneeling against the stained, rocky wall

of the cave opening, where the alien liverwort was no doubt making a terrible

mess of his period knees. He was frowning at the wall through half-moon

glasses, fingering a few leafy fronds of what Tegan had so casually and

erroneously dismissed as moss. He held some up to the light, presumably for the

woodlouse to get a better view of the laughably simple rhizoids. 'What do you

think?'

The giant woodlouse — it was actually a Tractator, Tegan recalled, and called

itself the Gravis, although she wasn't sure why she was supposed to care —

shuffled forward, body swaying with the weight of its bulky shell. Its slanted,

almond-shaped eyes, with wavy lines in place of pupils, gave it a thoughtful,

cunning air. 'I don't know, Doctor. . What's a year?'

Tegan sighed. Her own limited stock of patience had been exhausted about

twenty minutes into the trip, when the woodlouse's boundless enthusiasm for

learning about the TARDIS had run up against the limits of her

knowledge of it

— which pretty much amounted to how the bit in the middle went up and down,

and what you pulled to open the door. Since then she'd been cooped up inside in

an increasingly foul mood — 'Just a short hop!' the Doctor had promised, and

then, when pressed after 12 hours, gone off on one about temporal perspective

and tangential chronomass — with nothing to do but try to explain the function

of a wicker chair to something evolutionarily incapable of sitting down. No

wonder their other travelling companion had wanted to sit this one out.

'Doctor.. ' she hinted. 'Furlough will be waiting...'

'Just a moment, Tegan. There's something not quite right here.'

No kidding, she thought. This was supposed to be a waste-disposal mission

— drop off the leader of the despicable Tractators on some uninhabited planet

where it couldn't kill anybody, then head back to Frontios for tea and victory —

and now the Doctor had gone and made friends with it. Only hours ago they'd

had to forcibly prevent it from using zombified human colonists to excavate its

planet and turn it into a spaceship, but trust the Doctor not to let that get in the

way. Kolkokron was a nice change from the barren crags of Frontios, at least. The

TARDIS had barely even managed its usual trick of landing in a desolate cave,

choosing as a compromise this rather pleasant mossy hollow in the side of a

forest-filled crater. The trees seemed almost supernaturally verdant, forming a

thick canopy webbed together by curving, interwoven branches that hung down

in loops and threads to plunge back into the rich, moist earth.

There was no birdsong, no whirr or chirrup of insects, but the air was an

orange-grey mist of rain hissing gently all around them, softening the distance

into hazy suggestion and smelling of just-cut grass. It was, Tegan decided, stupid

and unfair.

After all, this was the first peaceful place they'd seen in months, and they'd

gone and brought a monster with them. She'd much rather have brought the

surviving colonists here and left the Gravis to its shiny caves and stupid gravel,

but the Doctor had been adamant. He couldn't be seen to interfere, for reasons

that presently eluded her but probably included the words 'Rassilon' and 'Laws

of Time', and that meant moving the woodlouse. It was Kolkokron or nothing.

The Doctor stood up abruptly, brushing bits of phoney moss from his hand.

'This isn't Kolkokron,' he said.

Beside him, the woodlouse looked astonished, inasmuch as that was possible

for a six-foot crustacean with no moving features. Essentially it just flapped its

paws. ‘It’s not?’ it screeched, in a voice of pure, grating evil. ‘Golly.’

Tegan snorted. ‘TARDIS technology comes up trumps again.’

‘Nothing so straightforward. The TARDIS says this is Kolkokron. It’s

certainly in the right place. I cross-referenced the coordinates from the Yyb

Fissure — that’s barely a meteor’s throw away. And yet…’ He waved a hand

expansively at the dense forest that lay before them. ‘That’s not Kolkokron.’

‘It is certainly a mystery, Doctor!’

Tegan scowled. ‘It’s only a planet. Maybe you just don’t recognise this bit.’

‘Impossible. I know Kolkokron like the back of Mimas, it’s completely

without life.’

‘Ah! And lacks this fascinating liverwort!’ Flap, flap. Idiot.

‘Exactly,’ said the Doctor. He stuck his hands in his pockets, surveying the

forest before them with a pensive air. ‘I had wondered whether all this had been

brought here recently, some sort of planet-forming, but it looks native enough.

Plant-only biospheres leave a very distinctive evolutionary footprint.’

The Gravis wiggled its antennae in glee. ‘Then the logic is

unassailable. We

have discovered an anomaly in space and time!'

Tegan glared at the back of its head, which looked exactly like the rest of its

lumpy hunch of a shell. 'Or,' she offered, 'we're lost.'

'Indeed,' it crowed. 'Lost in a spatial-temporal distortion it will take all our

wits to unravel!'

Tegan rolled her eyes.

'Now, come on,' scolded the Doctor. 'There's a mystery here, Tegan. Don't

you think we should make some effort to solve it?'

'No,' she said. 'I think we should get back to Frontios.'

'But what about the anomaly?'

'Nuts to the anomaly. Turlough will be wondering where we are.'

'So am I. That's the point.'

Tegan sighed. The woodlouse had bobbed its way over to the cave mouth,

and was now delicately clambering out into the open air. It was making excited

little noises about how big trees were, and how colourful everything looked, and

how it had always imagined sky would be flatter than that. It was just possible

she hated it now even more than when it had been trying to kill her and use her

corpse to drive a digger.

'It'll do though, won't it?' she pleaded. 'I mean, the wretched thing

looks

happy enough.' She lowered her voice to a whisper. 'Let's just take off while it's

not looking.'

There was a pause. The Doctor gave a little cough. While the Gravis trundled

on its merry way down the slope outside, doing its gravelly best to whistle, a

nasty feeling formed in Tegan's stomach. The promise of a row.

'Doctor... You did *tell* it we were leaving it here?'

He shifted uncomfortably, faffing about with his glasses and feigning sudden

interest in a wobbly hinge as an excuse not to look at her. 'Try to understand,

Tegan... The poor creature's been under a lot of stress. Finding out the humans it

killed are sentient. . The loss of its extrasensory drone bodies. . Falling over...'

'Doctor!' Tegan said, incredulity rising in her throat like very angry vomit.

She knew it wasn't exactly the Doctor's style to drop the Gravis off a cliff or

something while it was unconscious, but this was ridiculous. 'You can't get

squeamish about abandoning it, the thing's a murderer! You should have killed

it when you had the chance!'

'He has apologised, Tegan,' replied the Doctor reproachfully. 'Anyway, what

would that achieve?'

‘It would have served it right!’

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The Doctor frowned. ‘What a peculiar idea. Still, it’s too late now.’

‘Not for us. The place is uninhabited, we can just zap off back to Frontios.’

‘What, and risk exposing him to an unknown psycho-quantum field? No. Not

until we find out what’s going on. Then we’ll.. Then we’ll abandon him. I

promise.’

Yeah, thought Tegan. And I’ll drop you back at Heathrow first thing. The

Doctor’s promises had a way of taking a while to come true.

‘Come, companion Tegan, let us explore!’ shrieked the Gravis from outside,

where it was busy discovering the joy of rain. ‘There is a mystery to solve here!’

Tegan sighed. It was going to be one of those days. Again.

It is important to remember that events only happen once. If that.

Even the most casual inspection of the so-called ‘nature’ of the alleged universe will

demonstrate that time, itself a parochial absurdity of purely academic interest, is a linear

concept. Even if it were to be admitted that Queth was moving through phase-space

towards its doom, then (which it is not, such a notion being arrant conceptual tosh), it

certainly couldn’t be said that it were doing so for a second or greater time. Not only can

a complex space-time event not have an ending, it absolutely cannot have ended countless

times already.

Such claims are twaddle. Drivel. The baldest of dash. The poppiest, one might say, of

cock.

Queth was hurtling — or rather not, as change is an almost violently meaningless

concept — towards its certain if purely notional doom, for the first time, the last time, the

absolute and only time.

Again.

The Gravis wasn't good with hills, it turned out. Particularly ones made

entirely from thick, dark mud, alleviated only by the occasional hidden tree root

or treacherous extrusion of unexpected rock. It had fallen over twice, the first

time with great enthusiasm and the second rather less so, and Tegan was

growing heartily sick of levering it out of the slime. So far they'd explored a

couple of hundred yards of muddy forest, and solved precisely nothing.

In fairness she wasn't doing much better herself — she liked to think of her

leather miniskirt as a practical choice for the discerning girl-about-the-cosmos,

but her heels weren't doing her any favours, and her timeless, streaky punk top

was slick with rain. The Doctor, of course, was his usual mix of frowning

curiosity and bursts of sudden, boundless enthusiasm, merrily leading them in

the direction of where he claimed to be able to see a pall of dirty grey smoke

rising over the trees. CA sure sign of a level-4B technology!' he'd promised,

although Tegan was fairly sure that was a pencil.) He strode across the muck

with something amounting to glee, extolling the virtues of what, to Tegan, was

perfectly ordinary dirt, as the lumbering woodlouse levered its way out of

another blasted pothole.

'Tremendous nitrogen levels, you see,' he was saying. Or something like that,

at any rate: she'd just caught a heel on something unwise. 'Rich sunlight, plenty

of water, all the mud you can eat... Must be marvellous for growing dahlias.'

'I know little of these... "dahlias", Doctor,' said the Gravis, struggling out of a

small pit. It flexed its antennae forlornly, a haze of bright pink light forming

around the veiny, tentacular branches above as it tried to lift itself with its stupid

gravity powers. The only result was a splatter of dirty rainwater as the canopy

temporarily gave way, showering the creature with twigs and rotting leaves.

‘Are all planets so... mouldy?’ it asked, when it had fought its way upright again.

Tegan wouldn’t exactly have called it whining, but there was definitely a less

joyous tone to its voice.

Typically, the Doctor didn’t seem to have noticed. ‘Not at all, Gravis! Infinite

space, infinite variety. There are worlds of metal, deserts of glass... Oceans of gas

so thick you could walk across them. . Cities made of meat, and people made of

kelp.’

‘Eww,’ said the woodlouse. It was something of a revelation.

‘They’re not all like that,’ Tegan pointed out, stumping onwards. ‘I mean, a

lot of them are just rocks. Gallifrey’s rubbish. And Frontios is a dump.’

‘I am fond of Frontios.’

‘Well, it’s a paradise compared to most of the planets this close to the galactic

rim,’ the Doctor pointed out. ‘Barren wastelands, most of them. All rocks and

boulders.’

‘Kolkokron’s nice, though,’ Tegan interjected hastily, giving him a

meaningful glare. ‘Isn’t it?’

‘Oh. Oh, yes. Splendid. I admit, it is a bit rocky. .’

‘I am fond of rocks,’ said the Gravis, walking into a tree. Tegan shook her

head and walked on, pretending not to notice. The Doctor's taste in companions

had gone really weird since he'd changed his face and got into cricket, she

thought. First Turlough, then that useless android who sulked in its corridor and

refused to talk in anything but binary, and now Casper the Friendly Tractator.

The sooner they got back to Frontios, the —

'Ululululululu!'

An unearthly shriek rang through the trees, piercing the stillness and her

eardrums all at once. Bad news, she knew without thinking. This was no

background forest noise, but a full-fledged, purposeful howl. As if in

accompaniment, the branches started to rattle against one another in staccato

beats, the weblike canopy shaking with echoes of distant movements.

'Doctor? I thought you said this planet was uninhabited!'

'Well, yes...' he said, looking around fretfully. 'I also said it was Kolkokron,

and look how that turned out.'

The cry came again, echoing oddly through the web of foliage, sounding like

the call of some otherworldly beast. Well, no, it sounded like a chicken gargling,

but she wasn't about to take any risks.

'Hide!' she yelled, realising too late that in 'avoiding otherworldly hunter'

terms she would have been better off whispering, or perhaps tapping people on

the shoulder. Still, she grabbed the Doctor by the arm and hurled them both

down into the damp undergrowth, which turned out to be composed of waxy,

rhubarb- sized leaves that smelled faintly alcoholic. And almost immediately, he

picked himself up and ran back the way they had come. What was he thinking?

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‘Doctor? Tegan?’ called a voice dripping with what sounded like evil but

which the Doctor had assured her was only mucus. Of course, the dratted

Gravis. It was still standing by its tree, yards behind, oscillating twitchily back

and forth in confusion. ‘What is that sound? Where have you gone?’

She despaired sometimes, she really did. She picked herself up with a sigh,

ready to follow the Doctor back to fetch it, but as she did so the cry came again,

closer this time. This one sounded more like a chicken being strangled. But the

next one sounded like a chicken saying, ‘Shut up, idiot! Do you want to tell the

whole world we’re here?’

‘Yes,’ gargled another voice, nonplussed. ‘Isn’t that the point?’

‘Oh, stop being contrary, Loff,’ snapped a third.

‘Don’t have a go. You’re always having a go.’

‘Ululululu!’

‘Oh, shut up, Trehv,’ said several voices at once.

Tegan realised with a start that she was standing in full view of whatever was

coming, and pelted back to the others, who had still barely budged an inch.

There was a *zzchming* of what sounded suspiciously like a laser, or a phaser, or

one of those other things that ended in ‘aser’ and pain. She thought she saw a

flash of blue somewhere away in the trees.

‘Run!’ she shouted to the Gravis. It looked at her blankly. It didn’t, Tegan

realised, actually have any legs. Didn’t bode well.

‘Not that way, the *other* way!’ something shouted.

‘Ulululu!’

‘Oh, don’t set him off again.’

‘Are those… *aliens*?’ the Gravis asked the Doctor, thrilled at the prospect.

Despite the Doctor’s best efforts to spur the woodlouse on, they were ambling

away with all the urgency of a picnic.

‘Could we go a bit faster?’ she urged, over the Doctor’s babblings about

xenomorphic biocompatibility. ‘I think they’ve got guns.’

‘Ooh, what’s a gun?’ asked the Gravis. Tegan fought the urge to kick it.

Behind them, gargled cries of ‘Death to the Outsiders!’ echoed ever closer

through the trees. That was familiar territory, at least, although the heckles that

accompanied them (‘Outside what, exactly? I mean it’s a forest, how much more

outside can you get?’) were a new and exciting variation. She glanced back

towards the unseen voices — which seemed to be going in circles and squabbling

— and applied her shoulder to the Tractator’s shell, trying to get it to move

onwards.

‘It won’t do you any good, you know,’ said a voice from right behind her.

Tegan spun round. There was no one there.

‘Not that it’ll make any difference me telling you that. Blinkin’ predestination,

it’s a mug’s game, really, isn’t it?’

Tegan stared. There *was* someone there, for certain values of ‘someone’, and

indeed ‘there’. Hanging from the forest canopy by a long, sinuous tail — no, by

two tails — was an ugly, rumpled, warty creature with dull, dirty scales. It

looked a bit like an armadillo would look if an armadillo had a face full of

clacking mandibles, a pair of prehensile tails and a home on a planet of mud.

‘Doctor.. ’ she said.

‘Oh, have you found a friend, Tegan?’ he asked distractedly, busy levering

the Gravis off a small stone. ‘Well done, we could do with more of those.

Although personally I find the philosophical rejection of free will rather

unconvincing.’

‘Well, you can’t help it, can you?’ said the creature. ‘Que se blinkin’ ra, innit?

You want to duck about now, Tegan.’

Tegan didn’t know how the thing knew she was called Tegan, or indeed how

it knew she was supposed to duck, or indeed generally what the hell was going

on. However, two years aboard the TARDIS, off and on, had honed her instincts

to a razor-sharp edge of terror. When someone said ‘run’, you ran. And when an

alien armadillo said ‘cluck’...

She hurled herself to the ground. A bolt of blue-white energy shot through

the air where she had been standing a moment before, hissing as it turned the

rain in its path to superheated steam. It slammed into a tree trunk yards away,

and. . something went wrong with her eyes. It was as if the world bulged out

from the impact point, the forest seen for a moment through a grotesque

magnifying lens before slamming back to nothing. The trunk had gone, but there

was no hole, no smoke, no fire... The canopy just drooped a little lower there, the

adjacent trees bent absurdly inwards, as if the space had simply been removed

from existence and the world stitched back together around it, seamless but

smaller.

'Twit,' came a voice from the trees.

'Well, you try aiming something with your *hands*,' something else retorted.

'I'd like to see you manage it.'

'Look out, Doctor!' shouted the Gravis excitedly, as another shot hissed past

them, wiping out an innocent clump of rhubarb. More by accident than anything

else, the mobile chaos in the trees finally broke into the clearing, resolving itself

into half-a-dozen more space-armadillos, all firing in random directions. With a

zzchming of energy, a patch of mud by the Tractator's shell popped out of

existence, prompting a woodlousy squeak of excitement.

'There he is! Next to the tree!'

'What tree? We're in a *forest*.'

'Watch out, don't shoot Nuss!'

Zzchming!

'Oh, for Phoon's sake... what did I just say?'

The scaly little creatures swung rapidly through the trees, tail over tail like

inverted monkeys, alternately ululating and telling each other to pack it in. Their

bodies hung pendulum fashion from the ropelike branches, tiny mandibles

clacking at the head of the lazy L of each body, just above the tiny, toylike guns

they held in their front legs. There were only about six of them altogether, but

then, thought Tegan, they only had to not miss once.

‘Don’t worry, they all miss you,’ said the first, apparently psychic armadillo

from a few feet above. She rolled over in time to see it drop lazily down from the

canopy and plonk itself unceremoniously beside her, chewing on a bit of fruit, as

another shot zzchminged through the trees and evaporated the spot where he

had been hanging. ‘Name’s Chaugh, by the way. Resistance is futile.’

‘Is it? To what?’

‘Well... anything, really. That’s predestination for you.’ Tegan stared at it.

‘Just making conversation.’

Zzchming! Zzchming! Zzchming! went the armadillos, bubbles of forest

imploding on every side. The Gravis seemed positively delighted by the whole

thing, looking around eagerly and emitting an ‘ooh!’ of excitement at

every close

shave. Tegan gave it a wretched glare, and decided, on balance, that she'd rather

take her chances with being shot than lie here listening to it, accompanied by the

armadillo equivalent of Nostradamus.

Pulling herself to her feet by the shell of the captivated woodlouse, she was

just in time to see the newcomers swinging to an erratic, seesawing halt in a

rough semicircle around the Doctor. 'We have you surrounded, Time Lord!'

crowed the closest one as she brushed herself down. The constant drizzle made it

a completely pointless exercise, but she felt she had to make the effort.

'No, you haven't,' she pointed out irritably. She was tired and muddy

already, and being shot at hadn't improved her temper. 'Half of you aren't even

facing the right way. And there's a massive gap over there.'

'Kratt, I *told* you to cover his flank,' muttered the first speaker crossly.

'That's not his flank, it's his side,' said, presumably, Kratt — a scrawny little

creature with a lopsided head, hanging near the back of the group and sulking.

'Don't be such a pedant!'

'Oh, leave him alone, Plong,' chimed another.

'You keep out of this!'

'Ulululu!'

‘Shut up!’

This was directed, she assumed, at Trehv, who turned out to be the smallest

armadillo. He was hanging upside down, aiming enthusiastically at a mossy

rock, and didn’t give the impression of being quite all there. Plong gave him a

long, hard glare, as if daring him to go ululu again, before attempting to regain

his momentum.

‘Doctor!’ he said grandly, in the manner of someone embarking on a long-

rehearsed speech.

‘Why does everyone know my name today?’ grumbled the Doctor. ‘It’s

terribly off-putting, I —’ He was silenced by Plong, who was looking daggers at

him, inasmuch as this is possible for an armadillo. ‘Sorry, do go on.’

‘Doctor!’ Plong began again, with a stern cough. ‘Tegan! And Gravis! We, the

Queeth of Queth, greet you, and by the will of the people and the knowledge of

Phoon, apologise for what we are about to do.’

The Doctor and Tegan exchanged worried glances. ‘This is nice,’ said the

Gravis, peering up short-sightedly at Plong with every sign of fascination. ‘Does

this sort of thing happen a lot?’

‘Like you wouldn’t believe,’ muttered Tegan.

Plong waited for them to finish before resuming, with a cross little

hmph.

‘The Time of Isolation is nearly upon us,’ he said, after a moment’s pause to

remember where he’d got up to. ‘The Doctor must not be allowed to interfere.

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According to Phoon’s great plan, and to safeguard our planet, our future and our

cats, we sentence you —’

‘Did he say cats?’ asked Tegan. This was turning out to be quite an odd day.

‘We sentence you—’

‘What’s a cat?’ asked the Gravis.

‘We *sentence* you,’ snarled Plong, ‘thank you, yes — to removal from the

physical universe.’ On his gesture, the armadillos swung closer, tightening the

circle and occasionally bumping into one another and swearing. Plong did his

best to ignore them. ‘No appeal is permitted. Execution is immediate. Prepare to

be Isolated.’

‘Don’t worry,’ muttered Chaugh, as the circle of armadillos levelled their

guns at her head. ‘They don’t do it.’

The Gravis gaped, although in fairness it would be hard pressed to do

anything else. ‘Execution?’ it rasped, the bizarre dangly bits in its mouth rippling

outwards in alarm. ‘You mean.. these creatures intend to kill us?’ It sounded

terrified, which was a bit rich coming from something that had been intending

full-scale planetary invasion the day before. It gave a wheezy scream as Plong

raised an arm, and inexplicably threw itself to the ground — or at any rate fell

over fairly purposefully — landing face down in the mud with a sad little

splatter. It lay there on its belly, scrabbling at the mud with its pathetic flipper

paws. Tegan felt faintly embarrassed.

‘Now wait a moment!’ cried the Doctor, waving his hands in the air for a

chance to speak — and stepping defensively, Tegan couldn’t help noticing, in

front of the Gravis, leaving her directly in the line of fire. ‘That’s Phoon’s great

plan, is it? Safeguard the planet, don’t permit me to interfere, that sort of thing?’

A general ripple of agreement ran through the tangled branches. ‘Yes!’ it

went, and ‘Phoon’s great plan!’ and ‘ *Ulululu!* ’

‘Never going to happen,’ muttered Chaugh from somewhere near Tegan’s

knees.

‘Ah, ah! And how do you know that?’ the Doctor demanded, demonstrating

the ancient art of making it up as he went along. ‘Is he here?’

Phoon, said the general consensus, was not here. Phoon, added a vocal

minority, was dead. But Phoon, insisted a large contingent led by Plong, would

have wanted them shot.

‘Please do not shoot me with a gun!’ added the sobbing Gravis from its

puddle. Tegan rolled her eyes.

The Doctor frowned up at them through the drizzle, feigning confusion. ‘He’s

not here? Then how can you be sure what he’d have wanted, hmm?’

Tegan couldn’t quite believe they were even trying this. ‘He left orders,’ said

Plong, fixing the Doctor with a steely glare that might have been more effective if

he wasn’t eight feet away and an armadillo. The Doctor beamed back at him

unfazed.

‘Ah, but how do you know he did? Maybe that’s just what he wanted you to

think.’

‘It is what we think.’

‘Well, there you are then. Dare you take that risk?’

He held the gaze, gambling on an empty hand, and several empty heads. The

Queeth of Queth looked at one another, bemused. Chaugh continued to pick

dolefully through the leaf-litter, while Trehv revolved slowly on the spot, one tail

caught in his mandibles. The sword of Damocles hanging by the thread of

ignorance.

Very slowly, the Doctor lowered his hands. A tiny, self-satisfied snort drifted

up from Chaugh. ‘Told you,’ he sniffed.

‘Splendid. So perhaps now you’d like to put those things down and explain

this plan to us like civilised creatures? And help us get our friend up out of the

mud, it plays havoc with his uropods.’

‘And then can we shoot you?’ asked Kratt hopefully.

‘We’ll see.’

Free will, it has often been noted, is neither.

Past and future, schism and spinward, throughstream and counterphase; the terms

are arbitrary. Every point in phase-space, throughout every dimension, already exists. If

actions do determine what comes after (which they don’t, of course, because there is no

after), it is only because they too are determined by what came before (although, of course,

there is no before).

Nobody said you were going to like this.

There is no room for freedom. Those clusters of phase-space nodes that call themselves

people have no more ‘choice’ in their ‘actions’ than characters in a story already written.

Even if time existed, which it doesn’t, even if time repeated, which it can’t,

still, people

would not be free.

Try as they might— and they would, for that too is inevitable— no one could save the

world.

‘So Phoon *has* saved the world?’ the Doctor asked, for easily the severalth

time. It was proving a frustrating task to get a straight answer from the

armadillos, and the reason why was cleaning its mandibles with a twig.

Nope, not remotely,’ it said, spitting out a pip. It was Chaugh.

‘Yes he has!’ said Plong, who was hanging above him, swinging angrily by

the tails.

‘He hasn’t, you know,’ said Chaugh. ‘We’re all doomed.’

‘Yes he has,’ chorused the others. There was no denying it, this was gripping

stuff.

The day, if that’s what it was, was turning cold, the faint white suggestion of

a sun sinking lower in the mist. Tegan’s excitingly streaky punk top now clung

wetly to her back in the drizzle, snapping chill slaps down her back every time

she lost her grip on the Tractator’s slick shell. Overhead, armadillos swung in

excited circles in the rain, offering useful advice like ‘Pick it up’, ‘Don’t drop it

again', and 'Oh, you did'. The Doctor crouched in the mud, trying to get some

sense out of the others about Phoon and his plan, whoever-and-his-whatever

they were. Tegan couldn't tell if he was genuinely interested, playing for time

until the creatures forgot about killing them, or just trying to get out of helping

pick up the bug.

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Still, thought Tegan as she set about once more levering the wretched Gravis

out of the mud, it was marginally better than being shot.

'The world has been saved,' Kratt was explaining calmly to a baffled Doctor.

He was apparently one of the brighter Queeth, and as such one of the few not

doing headstands in the rhubarb. 'Phoon's plan guarantees it.'

'Does it heck,' muttered Chaugh moodily. The end is seriously nigh. Twenty-

three and a half, 24 minutes tops.'

'Splitter.'

'Now, hold *on*.. ' said the Doctor wearily, squatting between them with his

hands clasped between his stripy knees. 'Saved from whom, exactly? What

precisely is Queth supposed to be in danger from?'

'Nothing. It's perfectly safe.'

‘No, but if it wasn’t. .’

‘It is.’

‘Mysterious enemies,’ Chaugh chimed in morosely. ‘Dunn˚ who they are.

Been hunting us for as long as anyone can remember.’

‘They’ve destroyed all our home planets,’ added Loff from a tree. ‘It’s been

awful.’

‘But no longer!’ Plong assured them. ‘Phoon has made sure of that.’

‘No he hasn’t,’ added Chaugh. Someone threw a nut at him.

‘Phoon has a plan,’ said Kratt matter-of-factly, shushing the others into quiet

with a spare tail. ‘The Echo Effect will surround us. The Time of Isolation will

begin. Queth will be protected from all dangers, and for all eternity.’

‘Yeah, that’s true enough,’ admitted Chaugh. He held a piece of leaf up to the

light, gave it due consideration, and popped it in his mouth. He chewed it

thoughtfully before adding, ‘Still gonna end, though.’

‘No it *isn’t*.’

The argument pinged interminably back and forth, tugging Tegan’s attention

this way and that like some crazy alien tennis match. She resolved not to let

herself get sucked in. She’d had enough of interminable arguing in the TARDIS;

enough of the end of the world on every world they’d landed; enough of crazy

alien tennis that time on Kasteru, and enough of the armadillos about two

minutes after she'd met them. She'd frankly had enough of the Gravis too, but

her misery could do with the company, and at least dragging it out of the mire

made her feel useful.

At last, with a final grunt of effort, she managed to roll the thing over. Blobs

of carapace squelched slowly back into the mud to leave it lying forlornly on its

side, brownish water puddling around its middle. 'This planet is. . not friendly,'

it informed her weakly, once she'd picked the mud out of its wibbly mouth bits.

'You're not kidding,' she muttered, the sound of gargly argument all around

them. 'Occupational hazard with time travel. No one's ever pleased to see you.'

The creature struggled gamely to right itself, a haze of pink wrapping around

nearby tree trunks for purchase. 'I do not mean the animal tree creatures,' it

wheezed, as it wiggled its antennae for all it was worth. 'This ground is... cruel. I

tried to burrow into the safety of the earth, but the earth is not safe. It is dirty and

wet, and it has bits in it.'

'Well, that's mud for you,' said Tegan.

She tried to sound spiteful, but she couldn't really work up the enthusiasm.

After all, in her experience disillusionment was what life was all about. For

Tegan it had been becoming an air hostess. She'd wanted to fly, not stand on the

sidelines looking pretty and answering idiot questions. The 19805 hadn't been

ready for that, so she'd turned to the future; travelling in an alien time machine

capable of visiting any planet in the cosmos, any moment in the whole of

recorded history... just so she could stand on the sidelines looking pretty stupid

instead, and *asking* the idiot questions.

The dispirited woodlouse was simply discovering a universal rule. It didn't

matter if you took the money, opened the box, or climbed inside it and took a

spin round the galaxy: all choices led to disappointment. Made you spit blood

just to think about it, Tegan thought bitterly. But then what could you do?

'There you are, Gravis!' cried the Doctor suddenly, springing to his feet and

scattering armadillos in all directions. He bounded over to clasp the Tractator by

the closest things it had to shoulders, beaming at its disgusting mouth and failing

in any way to congratulate the mud-stained Tegan for doing all the work. 'Just

the chap we were looking for. We have a new mystery to solve!'

The woodlouse looked quietly aghast. 'Oh,' it said. 'Good.'

'You see, it seems this planet — which I hardly need remind you isn't

supposed to be here in the first place — is in a situation of some peril. In fact it's

going to be destroyed by mysterious enemies in about twenty minutes.'

'No, it isn't!' shouted Plong from the rhubarb.

'Yes, it is,' said Chaugh.

'Yes it *is*,' countered Loff, who had got a bit lost.

'… or else it isn't,' the Doctor concluded. 'There's a certain amount of

disagreement on the issue.'

'Oh, no, there isn't!' chanted Loff.

The Gravis swivelled to look around itself, antennae jiggling in panic. Little

blips and blops of pink appeared and disappeared in the air around it, whipping

branches back and forth at random, and twanging Trehv into the rhubarb with

an excited yip. 'The. . *world* is going to end?' it gasped, raindrops zizzling down

its shell as it quivered all over.

The Doctor looked rather startled, doing that calming little hand gesture that

Tegan found so infuriating. 'Ah, well, now, we can't be sure of that,' he said

hastily, over the sound of Loff insisting that they could. 'That's rather the point.

Chaugh is convinced Queth can't be saved, but the others are equally sure it

already has been. Fascinating, don't you think?'

'No!' shouted Loff enthusiastically. They did their best to ignore her.

The Gravis gave a pensive wobble. 'Yes, it is most... fascinating,' it wheezed,

in a voice that wouldn't fool a four-year-old. The Doctor beamed delightedly.

'Either we cannot save this planet, or we do not need to do so. So, perhaps... we

should return to the TARDIS?'

Tegan felt a reluctant surge of admiration. That was the sort of crass

cowardice she could respect. It was almost like having Turlough with them.

But the Doctor was having none of it. 'What, and lose out on all this?' he

cried, striding around in the rain and gesturing grandly at nothing in particular.

'Give up on finding out what happened to Kolkokron? Never get to the bottom

of Phoon's plan? No, no, there's always a chance, always a choice. Always

something you can do if you dig deep enough. I thought you liked mysteries.'

The Gravis blanched beige, looking helplessly at Tegan. She shrugged. If the

Doctor wasn't interested in hearing her opinion, the damned thing would have

to handle him itself. ‘But how can we hope to help?’ it squeaked. ‘The planet’s

destiny is fixed.’

Fair point, thought Tegan. ‘Maybe they should just get another one? I mean,

no offence, but this place is useless.’ There was a pause. It wore a variety of

quizzical expressions, all aimed in Tegan’s direction.

‘How would we do that?’ asked Kratt eventually.

She was floored. ‘I don’t know... in spaceships and things.’

‘What’re they, then?’

Pathetic. She was an idiot dressed as a bigger idiot, on a planet full of idiots

who thought she was the biggest idiot of all. She gave up and sat down on a tree

stump that turned out, predictably, to be rotten to the point of mushiness. No

wonder the Gravis had usurped her. It was a woodlouse with the IQ of a man,

and she was a woman with the IQ of an air hostess. She should just stay quiet

like a good girl, and let the grown-ups talk.

‘Come to think of it, that’s rather a good point, Gravis,’ said the Doctor

thoughtfully, flicking his frock coat aside to jam his hands in his trouser pockets,

and showering Tegan with mud in the process. He’d completely ignored her

comments, of course. ‘If the world is either definitely saved or definitely

doomed, why bother trying to kill us?'

'To prevent you from interfering with Phoon's plan!' shouted Plong

immediately, button-eyes shining. He'd been waiting for an excuse to shout

something for ages.

'Ah, so it can be interfered with? The future isn't fixed?'

Tegan bit her lip. She absolutely, resolutely was not going to ask what he

meant. 'They didn't try to kill us,' wheezed the Gravis, out of nowhere.

Nobody said anything for a moment, except Tegan, who went, 'What do you

mean, Gravis?' before she could stop herself. There were no words for how

stupid she had become.

'I had not realised. They said Prepare to be Isolated. That is not the same as

death, is it?'

The Doctor, pulled up short mid-deduction, spun on his heels to stare at the

nearest armadillo. 'It's not?'

'No,' Loff explained, or rather failed to. 'You'd have been in a wallet

dimension.'

'Satchel dimension,' Kratt corrected, winning himself several foul looks.

'A... pocket dimension?' suggested the Gravis. Tegan scowled. She'd been

about to say that.

Was it?'

The Doctor's brow furrowed. 'That's certainly what the implosion effect

suggests. Snipped into a vacuum universe, severed from the rest of creation...

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Cut off from cause and effect, so we couldn't interfere with their destiny. But

why go to all that bother? We'd still be dead.'

'No, you wouldn't. It's condom fizzles,' said Loff proudly. There was another

one of those clumsy silences. Tegan determined to sit still and let the grown-ups

deal with it.

'What?' asked the Doctor at last.

'Quondam physiques,' Kratt confirmed, more or less. 'What you do is, you

put a cat in a box. .'

'Quantum physics, yes, I know what it is, I don't understand the relevance.'

'It's the Fundamental Theory of Phoon, ain't it,' volunteered Chaugh, who

had been poking with interest at the Gravis's bottom. Tegan preferred not to

wonder why. 'You can't change the future, so what you do instead is, you hide

from it. No one's around to see you, that means no one knows if you're alive or

dead, and that means you're both.'

The Doctor glared at him. 'Claptrap,' he retorted, after a moment of

grimacing contemplation. ‘Utter tripe.’

‘It’s not! It’s all part of Phoon’s plan!’ cried the massed armadillos, except

Chaugh, who didn’t seem to care either way, and Trehv, who was squealing

somewhere in the undergrowth pretending to be a Gravis. ‘That’s how he’s

going to save the world! It is the power of the Echosphere!’

The Doctor stared at them, aghast. It wasn’t often he was rendered

speechless, but this seemed to have done the trick. Tegan would have to

remember it for use when she could do with a spot of peace and quiet. ‘Of

course. The “Time of Isolation”. That’s your plan? Erase yourselves from the

real-space universe, so no one can tell whether you’ve been destroyed? No

wonder you’re confused about what’s going to happen, it’s quantum uncertainty

on a grand scale.’

‘No, it isn’t.’

‘It’s also insane.’

‘Is not!’

It was an all-too-familiar scene. Aliens hellbent on doing something

genocidally ill-advised. The Doctor railing against the nearly inevitable. Tegan

swept along in the middle of it, following nothing.

‘I… do not understand,’ the Gravis whispered to itself, as the argument

zipped back and forth.

‘Join the club,’ muttered Tegan, surprised. She could hear the Doctor yelling

about science in the background, which was one of his favourite things to do. He

seemed to be chiefly concerned with explaining the difference between a cat and

a planet, which Tegan hadn’t previously considered to be very high up their list

of priorities, but she assumed he knew what he was doing.

‘Hang on though, I thought you were enjoying working all this out?’ she

objected. The woodlouse looked at her like she was mad. It was looking

decidedly the worse for wear, she realised; bits of dead leaves stuck to its muddy

underbelly, sodden fur clinging wetly to its carapace, and with a definite droop

to its antennae. It had never left the safety of its tunnels before, come to think of

it. Never been faced with the Doctor’s enthusiasm. Never had to avert an

apocalypse. ‘Never mind,’ she said.

The Doctor was still going off on one about cats. Something to do with this

thing of locking them in boxes, apparently, which seemed a thoroughly

reprehensible way of carrying on, although he claimed it didn’t matter if you

didn't look. Tegan couldn't see that standing up in court.

'Come on, you,' she told the Gravis, clambering wearily to her feet. It looked

at her blankly, although whether it meant to do or just happened to look like that

anyway was open to debate. 'He's shouting long words. That means he's about

to save the world.'

'Then... what are *we* about to do?'

She shrugged, pulling her sopping top straight around her and squaring her

shoulders into the drizzle. Idiot question. 'We watch him.'

'Honestly, what *nitwit* taught you about the Schrödinger's Cat Principle?' the

Doctor was crying, with such urgency his voice skidded into a higher register on

random words. 'Building a vacuum universe isn't like putting up a Wendy

house, you know.'

' *Mitten* universe,' said a voice from the trees. No one took any notice.

'You really think you can escape your doom by hiding in a separate

dimension? Without a focal space-time matrix? Or a vortex anchor? Or the

slightest conception of coherence physics? And you'll be okay because *no one will*

see you die?'

There was a sharp silence, broken only by the sound of Loff falling out of a

tree. 'Is that wrong?' asked someone in a small voice.

‘Yup,’ said Chaugh glumly. ‘Seventeen minutes till the end of the world, by

the way.’

The Doctor closed his eyes, and took a careful breath. ‘Then I think you’d

better take me to this Echosphere of yours, don’t you?’ he said. ‘There isn’t much

time.’

Change is impossible without time. Time is impossible without change. It is trivially

obvious, therefore, that time itself cannot change.

Even if history existed. Even if it repeated. Even if people had free will. The same

choices would be made, the same events would repeat, the same history would play out,

every time. No, don’t look like that. It would.

There are no second chances. The loop of time does not go round and round until

things end another way. The fate of Queth does not hang in the balance, waiting for the

scales to fall.

There is a junction in phase-space called ‘Queth ends’. So Queth would end. Get used

to it.

The Echosphere was a disappointment, Tegan thought. But then these things

always were. The fabled Gallifreyan Matrix had turned out to be a bit of a damp

squib too, and the Big Bang had been rubbish. So it should have come as no great

surprise that the ‘Sphere was nothing but a big metal ball, about twice her height,

so streaked with rust, water stains, bubbly patches of red-brown corrosion and

the inevitable mud that she could barely make out its original colour. The whole

thing looked on the verge of collapsing at any moment, which would be, she

thought, the perfect end to the perfect day.

It was sitting at the very bottom of the crater, where the trees thinned out to

bare rock — or to what would have been bare rock if it wasn’t covered in more

damned mud — surrounded by huge, ribbed metal cables, obscure bits of broken

machinery and, now, a growing host of stroppy armadillos. The pall of smoke

they’d seen from afar rose from it in uneven clouds as the drizzle sizzled away

on contact, no doubt boiled away by some sort of ghastly radiation, which was

probably eating away at her insides even as they spoke.

There was no sign of how it was supposed to save the planet, or destroy it, or

indeed do anything at all except sit there and rust. It was all rather depressing.

‘Thirteen minutes till the end of the world,’ announced Chaugh, who was

now perched on her left shoulder, despite her considerable efforts to

the

contrary. She smacked at him, but he dodged expertly away and bit her ear

instead.

‘Now what, Doctor?’ she asked, before the woodlouse could get there and say

it for her.

The Doctor prodded at what might once have been an important piece of

technology, and his finger went through it in a small rain of rust. He pulled it out

again and wiped it on his jumper, patting the panel apologetically. ‘I don’t quite

know,’ he concluded, voicing a thought Tegan could have applied to a dozen

things without trying. ‘The core systems seem functional enough, but the energy

buffers have gone the way of all technology. How on earth were you expecting to

power it?’

‘Not telling,’ snapped Plong from a wonky control bank. He’d been in a foul

mood ever since the interminable argument over bringing the Doctor had ended,

concluding in favour of doing so by three votes to one, with one abstention and

one sort of ulubloohooey noise. ‘It’s a secret.’

‘It’s our greatest achievement,’ explained Loff proudly, from atop a

crumbling metal box that might once have been a control panel and was now a

sophisticated arrangement of holes. She tail-gestured at the ‘Sphere. ‘The Genius

of Phoon.’

‘It would have to be. There’s no solar battery, no planet-sink, no gravity-

lens. . Not nearly enough stored energy for what it is.’

‘But what is it?’ Tegan asked, before she could stop herself.

‘It is a hybridised electromagnetogravitic device for detecting quantum

echoes of far-flung events,’ came an exhausted, wheezy voice from the trees.

Tegan looked up in surprise. She’d almost given up on the Gravis — it had

valiantly started trudging down here, but at such a torturously slow pace she’d

more or less assumed it would have given up. Yet there it stood at the edge of the

clearing, carapace gleaming in the twilight. Its antennae were drooping down

past its chin, the once shiny skin of its belly was caked with dried mud, and the

thick, crusty white veins snaking over its chest and arms were pulsing with

exertion. For a giant genocidal woodlouse, it looked surprisingly pathetic.

‘Well done, Gravis!’ said the Doctor, without missing a beat. ‘It detects the. .

the ripples, if you like, of quantum displacement through the universe.’ He

caught Tegan's blank look. 'You know, how particles, when split, remain in

contact at a quantum level? So that if one collapses the other will adopt the same

phase?' Her look became, if anything, blanker. 'The basis of Hamilton-Jacobi

teleportation?'

She shook her head. He looked a bit crestfallen. 'Well.. it's like that,' he

finished lamely, tugging experimentally at what may or may not once have been

a lever, and which in any case came off in his hand. He looked at it in surprise.

'The whole thing's obviously a remnant of a previous civilisation. But these

creatures think it can save their world — cut it off permanently from the universe

at a quantum level, so that no observer can collapse and actualise the waveform

of their destruction.'

'And can't it?' asked Tegan once he'd stopped talking; clinging to the bit

about saving the world, like a life belt in the flood of gabble.

The Doctor stuck his hands in his pockets, pontificating grimly. 'Oh, no, it can

do it all right. You've seen it happen — those echoic pulse regulators they're

using as guns. But if you cut something off from existence, it ceases to exist.

That's what it means. And I'm just guessing, but I don't think total annihilation is

what dear old Phoon was looking for.'

Tegan wasn't honestly surprised. She'd seen a few of the other Queeth

lurking in the shade of the trees, giggling, chasing their tails and having

complicated arguments about mud. The odds of any one of them doing

something scientific without messing it up wholesale were about on a par with

her chances of going five minutes without asking a stupid question.

Talking of which, the Gravis had opened its mouth. She could almost hear the

quantum echoes of the words 'I'll explain later' rippling back from a few seconds

in the future, and decided to save them both the effort. 'I understand all that,' she

lied smoothly, eliciting a snort of disbelief from Chaugh. 'But what else can we

do? I mean, if the alternative is having their enemies blow the place up. .'

'But that's just the point!' cried the Doctor, slapping his palm down hard on a

control panel, which sank mournfully into the mud behind him as he strode

around with sudden, angry energy. 'The effect doesn't have to be localised,

otherwise the 'Sphere could only detect itself! If I can persuade it to suppress the

quantum reality of something other than Queth, I can drop a different target into

a vacuum dimension.'

‘The mysterious enemies!’ cried the Gravis, much to Tegan’s embarrassment.

What did it say when a woodlouse made a better job of following things than

you? ‘You can use the Echosphere against them!’

‘Yes, that’s what I just said,’ said the Doctor testily. ‘However, it does rather

depend on them letting me in on their little secret. “The Genius of Phoon”,

whatever that is. I’ll have to shift the Schrödinger nexus, and that means having

access to the core systems. I can’t get that without power. I can’t *save* them

without power.’ He turned to Plong, folding his arms. ‘You understand? If you

want your planet to be saved, if any of you want to live beyond the next 13

minutes —’

‘Eleven minutes.’

‘How time flies — then you must show me the Genius of Phoon. It’s the only

way.’

The Queeth looked at one another. And then, as one, all eyes turned to Plong,

except Trehv’s, which went round in little circles. On his throne of broken

machinery, Plong drew himself up to his full height — although given that this

was only a foot and a half the effect was slight to middling — and set his face in

what, had he any recognisable features, might have been a determined

expression. He managed to hold it for three whole seconds before deflating

utterly.

‘All right,’ he said. ‘It’s round the other side. You better come and have a

look.’

And before Tegan had even had time to take it in, the Doctor was breezing off

round the ‘Sphere with a handful of distressed armadillos in his muddy wake,

leaving her standing there like a lemon. She started to trudge resignedly after

him like a slightly more proactive lemon, but then found herself, inexplicably,

hanging back for the Gravis to catch up. It was plodding along determinedly,

head down, rain soaking disregarded into the thick black fur between the

mucusy, overlapping pustules of its shell. And yet... Tegan was sure she could

see fear in its eyes. Unless that was more mucus. She gave it a weak smile, feeling

a bit stupid just walking along in silence. ‘All right there, Gravis?’ she asked

feebly.

It swivelled to look at her, having to halt its progress to do so. ‘Things are

certainly.. exciting, Tegan,' it rasped, trying none too successfully to keep the

fear from its voice. 'We have been captured! By alien creatures! And... the world

is going to end!'

'Welcome to the TARDIS,' Tegan muttered.

'It is all most exhilarating,' said the Gravis unconvincingly, moving on again,

and looking ahead to where the Doctor was crouched beside the Echosphere,

poking at something with a stick. 'And now. . we must wait on the sidelines, yes?

Hoping for the wise Doctor to find a solution?'

Tegan felt a bit put out. 'Not just that,' she said defensively. 'I'm usually right

in the thick of things. Or, well... I get locked up, at least. Or possessed. Or locked

up and possessed. Um. But sometimes I escape. And then get locked up again.'

She tailed off, her mind a blank. 'You know,' she said. 'Heroics.'

The Gravis looked at her with large, sad eyes.

'You all die in ten minutes, by the way,' said Chaugh gloomily, his sharp

claws scratching at her shoulder through her top. 'Sorry, it was all so exciting I

forgot to say.

Everyone is going to die. This is what is known as a fact of life. Indeed, it is the only

fact of life; everything else is just coincidence.

Specifically, Chaugh is going to die in two and a half minutes. The Doctor is going to

realise he has overlooked something vital in six minutes. The Gravis is going to do

something monumentally stupid in seven and a half minutes. Everything on the planet

will die in ten minutes, when, as has been more than amply foreshadowed, the world is

going to end. And the Doctor and Tegan will make a miraculous escape, at least for the

time being. But then you knew that already. It's very nearly a fact of life.

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However, while not one of them will live beyond the next ten minutes, the Queeth as

a species nevertheless survives. Forever. In a manner of speaking.

This is what is known as an exception.

There was quite a crowd of armadillos now, as their numbers were swelled

by curious newcomers drifting in from nearby trees. They were grouped around

one of the boxy lumps at the base of the Echosphere, where the bottom fifth or so

arced gracelessly beneath the mud, barely supported by the plinths of perforated

metal around its circumference. These were clearly more than mere pedestals,

however, graced as they were by the sort of ribbed metal dome and corrugated

fin that said 'higher technology' in a voice even Tegan could hear. Every now

and then one of them fell off.

‘The Genius of Phoon!’ Plong proclaimed from a neighbouring plinth, just as

Tegan was plodding up with the unhappy Gravis in tow.

Phoon’s Glory, isn’t it?’ said Kratt, who was curled up around some nearby

rusty cabling. ‘Wasn’t there a memo?’

‘Yeah, Trehv ate it,’ added Loff.

‘Well, whatever,’ said Plong. ‘Good, isn’t it?’

Tegan looked. One side of the nearest pedestal had been ripped off, exposing

a mass of metal intestines. Metal tubes wound around blocky pistons and shunt-

housings; hoses of ugly, mottled brown plastics linked broken pipes to blackened

valves, to inexplicable little round things with bits sticking out. Something fizzed

fitfully in the puddle of dirty rainwater that had collected at the bottom, bright

green fluid gulping to the surface from some submerged outlet.

She poked at it with a toe —

‘Don’t let it touch you! Mentasyntasyntheic acid, or something very like it.’

— and stopped moments before touching the surface, slowly rewinding her

movements to squelch her foot squarely back into the mud. You knew where you

were with mud.

The Gravis blinked; an impressive sight with its huge eyes, and the

first time

Tegan had seen it use them for anything more than an impassive stare.

‘Mentasynthesis?’ it boggled. ‘You mean that this is.. a mental absorption

process? The creatures power their machines with their minds?’ As idiot

questions went, Tegan had to admit, it beat the pants off her plan of going

‘what?’.

The Doctor wore an expression of muted fury. ‘Oh, yes, Gravis. Primitive,

stupid and ineffective, but yes. This is the source of it all. All their power... those

guns... that stupid plan. . the Genius of Phoon. A broken fuse-box. It seems

Phoon had no more idea about technology than the rest of them. And now

they’re all dead.’

‘What?’ asked Tegan, caught off her guard. Dammit.

‘Yeah,’ said Loff. ‘Practically everyone I know. Bike, Namf... Phoon, of

course. . All the clever ones. Into the bath.’

‘Wait a minute...’ said Tegan. Something was starting to fall into place in her

head. Kratt. Plong. Trehv. All of them. ‘The intelligent Queeth killed themselves?

So that you lot could survive? The ones who — aren’t intelligent?’

Kratt beamed, lopsided head wobbling with pride. Plong nodded so

enthusiastically he dropped his gun. Loff dribbled in a faintly affirmative

fashion.

Trehv... was just Trehv. The elite of Queth. And they'd done it on purpose.

She'd been wrong about this planet, Tegan thought. The Gravis could keep it.

'Except that's not quite true, is it?' said the Doctor sharply, interrupting her train

of angst. 'There isn't enough power. Not everyone who was supposed to soak

themselves in that toxic concoction could bring themselves to do it.' He smiled,

just past her shoulder. 'Could you, Chaugh?'

The creature by her ear sniffed dismissively. She craned her head back to get

a look at him, scaly and unrepentant on her shoulder, his coiled tails shifting

round her upper arm. 'Not much point, was there?' he said morosely, nodding

his head at the Doctor with a little click of his mandibles that somehow contrived

to come across as a grimace. 'Can't change what's going to happen. That's why

it's called "What's going to happen", see. Plus, I'd seen in the Echosphere that I

wasn't going to do it, you can see the spot I was in.'

Tegan frowned. 'You seethe future? In the Echosphere?'

The Doctor waved her down with a hand. 'Yes, yes, a phase-space projection,

that's what it's *for*. The Gravis will explain later.'

'Pretty depressing idea, I can tell you that,' said Chaugh, shifting on her

shoulder. 'You don't want to see your own death, it takes all the fun out of life.

Eight minutes, by the way.'

'Have we saved the world yet?' asked Kratt, tails flicking merrily across what

were probably quite important bits of Echosphere innards. 'Only Trehv needs to

go to the toilet.'

'Won't be a problem for long,' Chaugh promised. 'The Doctor wants to have a

look in the 'Sphere first, identify the threat. Won't work, of course, but there you

are. You can't stop the world ending, or him trying. But this is where I die.'

'What?' asked the Doctor. *Hah.*

'I've seen it,' said Chaugh. 'I jump into the acid bath, in 38 seconds. None of

this lot have got the brains to power it up, so it's gotta be me.' Tegan realised,

belatedly, that he was no longer perched six-footed on her shoulder, where he'd

been gloomily counting down to their destruction. He'd reared up on his hind

legs, tails unwrapping themselves from her arm, and was looking down at the

bath of whatever-it-was with an expression of resigned irritation, flexing his

multiple knees. ‘Thirty-one. .’

‘What is it doing?’ the Gravis asked, alarmed. It jerked its limp antennae, the

only result some pinkly redirected drizzle. ‘Do not let it jump!’

‘Wait a sec, I’ve got my foot stuck,’ grumbled Chaugh. ‘I knew this would

happen.’

Wait!’ Tegan yelped, although she wasn’t sure why. He’d been frankly

getting on her nerves. ‘You don’t have to do this. You’re a free... thing...’

Scuse me, can you just lift your — Oh, that’s got it.’

Tegan forced herself not to grab him by the tails and shake him. ‘You can’t

kill yourself just because you know you’re going to! That’s not a reason!’

‘Tell that to the future. Twelve seconds.’

The Doctor looked aghast. ‘Chaugh, please. . There has to be another way.’

‘Eight, seven... Pity really, there’s a good bit coming up in a minute.’ Chaugh

shrugged. ‘I dunno, predestination, eh? Can’t live with it...’

They grabbed for him. It was already too late. The scaly body zipped through

the air, tails slipping through Tegan’s grasping hands by millimetres, and

splashed into the rancid liquid at her feet. She could hear the scales cracking as

the acid ate into them, even as his body stiffened into immobility, pitching under

the surface like a dropped pencil. The liquid clouded with sudden foam.

Something frothed crimson in the liquid. There were... lumps. And then there

weren't.

The pool lay still, only dimpled by the rain.

'Horrible...' Tegan whispered. No wonder the poor creature had been so

depressed, knowing that was in store for him. She hated herself for letting it

happen. Or rather, she decided, she hated everyone else — and especially him.

He didn't have to have done it. He could just have walked away. Like her Aunty

Vanessa always told her, you always have a choice. You could always —

'Poke it with a stick!' shouted Kratt, scampering eagerly around the

machinery to get a closer look. The other armadillos were already clustered in a

group around the box, claws flaking rust from every surface as they jostled for a

better view.

'Cor,' said Loff, peering down with interest. 'Don't they go a funny colour?'

'Leave it, please...' Tegan choked, staggering away from them, and the

Gravis, and its uncomprehending eyes. 'Just leave it.'

The Doctor strode forward. 'That was unnecessary,' he snapped, shooing

away the crowd of them to crouch in the mud, studying the mechanical entrails

that spilled from the puddle. His hands, tracing the connections, shook. ‘A

stupid, pointless waste of life. There are a hundred ways to power this machine.

A thousand. No one need have died.’

‘So?’ said Plong, clambering up the ribbed side of one of the ‘Sphere’s many

supports as if to reassert his authority. ‘That’s what people do, isn’t it? Die?’

The Doctor didn’t answer. He just set his face in a neutral frown and fiddled

with the taps on the acid-filled tubes. Tegan cast about herself, feeling suddenly

alone on this dark, muddy planet. Plong was wrong, she knew that. It was like a

little mantra. But everywhere she went, people died. Some of them were robots

and some of them were armadillos, and quite a lot of them were actually quite

annoying up until the point where they got pointlessly killed, but they were all

equally dead. These days she couldn’t even remember their names.

‘Crikey,’ came Kratt’s voice from somewhere. ‘Is it supposed to do that?’

Tegan looked up, blinking useless tears out of the way. Where moments ago

there had been a grotty metal ball, there was. . well, there was *still* a grotty metal

ball, but now there was something behind it. No, not behind.. To one

side. Only

not any of the sides she was familiar with. All around her, stunned armadillos

gaped at the sight. It was as if the globe had become a strange, swollen hole into

some other place; a black void filled with a delicate silvery web of infinitely thin

strands, glittering with the light of sideways stars.

‘What the hell is that?’ she asked. If idiot questions were the order of the day,

she could at least be an angry idiot.

The Doctor had leapt up on Kratt’s words, pressing his hands against the

surface of the metal ball — only now they somehow seemed to have moved

through the metal, into the void beyond. ‘Salvation, if we’re lucky,’ he muttered,

hands deep in a place that shouldn’t have existed, pushing and pulling the image

into new and confusing configurations. ‘It’s a five-dimensional image-map of

localised phase-space, courtesy of Chaugh’s mental energy.’

Gosh, thought Tegan. You live and don’t-quite-learn.

‘His mind must have provided the last of what was needed to power up the

‘Sphere. And just in time, look.’ The Doctor pointed to a web of lines that looked,

to Tegan’s eyes, like any other web of lines, albeit with some pretty

unlikely

perspective. ‘See, there’s Queth at the present moment...’ He moved his finger in

a direction she wasn’t entirely familiar with, following the complex routes

through implausible angles as they came to a confused tangle, and then

disappeared in an impossible fog of nothing. ‘And there it isn’t, in five minutes

time. Chaugh was really very good, you know. There’s a knack to understanding

five-space. I’m amazed he could make anything of it at all.’ He gave a bitter half-

smile. ‘Hope for them yet. Always assuming, of course, I can find their

mysterious enemies, relocate the Schrödinger nexus, adapt Phoon’s technique to

work on a non-local target and drop every weapon of matter destruction out of

space-time, all without access to the echoic pulse regulators, before they blow up

the planet.’ He looked at her. ‘So you might like to stop asking questions for a bit

and let me get on with it, hmm?’

He gave her a grim smile and plunged back into the ‘Sphere, leaving her

feeling oddly at a loose end for someone with five minutes to live. She slouched

off into the mud a little way to escape the excited chatter of the armadillos, who

were bickering over what sort of nut a five-dimensional phase-space map was,

and stood in the rain feeling pointless.

Away by the ‘Sphere, the water in the broken pedestal stared at her, willing

her to admit her failure. Cries of ‘ *Ulululu!* ’ and ‘Somebody find a bucket!’ drifted

past her ears. She tried humming a tune. Four minutes? It was like waiting for an

apocalyptic bus.

‘Did the creature… die?’

She turned around, surprised. The woodlouse loomed at her out of the rain,

with an expression of unfathomable woe on its stupid face. How long had it been

lurking out here, awkward and forgotten? It had been silent since Chaugh had

jumped into the acid, she realised; as surplus to requirements as her.

‘You saw it happen, didn’t you?’ she retorted. ‘What’s it to you?’

‘I am sorry, Tegan, I.. I find it hard to comprehend. These creatures — they

are sentient beings, like you?’

‘Stretches credulity, doesn’t it?’ she muttered, eyes on the distant Trehv, who

was trying to untie his tails with his teeth.

‘Then I do not understand. This is what you meant by heroics? To dissolve in

acid?’

Tegan shrugged, sidestepping away from the memory.

The Gravis swayed gently in the dark. ‘I do not think I like your exciting

adventures with the Doctor, Tegan. There is so much death. Even for heroes. The

universe is not as... nice, as I had hoped.' It stopped, ugly almond eyes shining in

the gloom. Tegan held its gaze, uncertain. Surely that was just rain dripping

down its cheek? Surely.

' *What?* ' came a familiar voice from the Echosphere. 'But you *must* know!'

It was the Doctor, his cry coloured with anger and just a tinge of panic. She

wrenched her gaze away from the woodlouse, half with relief, to see that the

crowd around him had grown to a throng, cheering him on as he wrestled with a

non-specific armadillo. Honestly, you leave him alone for one minute...

'You *must* have realised. You can't be under attack for that long without

asking who was doing it!'

She jerked her head at the Gravis, but it was already dragging itself back

across the mud towards the 'Sphere like a faithful, hunchbacked puppy. She'd

have laughed at its dogged loyalty if she wasn't too busy doing exactly the same

thing herself, jogging dumbly across some stupid planet to ask questions only an

idiot would ask.

‘What’s happening, Doctor?’ she panted, hoping it came across as ironic.

They had, she was uncomfortably aware, barely three and a half minutes to

Armageddon, and this somehow didn’t look one of those ‘hurray, we have saved

the day’ moments.

She arrived well ahead of the lumbering Gravis, to find a calf-high circle of

scales and confusion, with the Doctor in the middle, grasping a captive armadillo

and practically shaking it in fury.

‘Tell her,’ barked the Doctor, thrusting it at her face as if in demonstration of

some incontrovertible proof. It was Plong, she realised, hanging upside down by

both tails, to the mixed delight and bewilderment of the new arrivals. ‘Go on!

Tell her what you’ve done. All that planning, all that sacrifice — and you don’t

even know.’

‘Don’t know what?’ asked a voice from the crowd.

‘That’s what he’s saying! We don’t *know*,’ said another, with a distinct lisp.

‘Cor, he knows his stuff, doesn’t he?’

‘Well. . I dunno.’

‘You’ve been under attack for your entire history,’ said the Doctor, his face

clearly one that had had enough of that sort of thing. ‘You’ve been fleeing as long

as your species can remember. Every planet you've ever settled on has been

destroyed within generations. And you *never asked who by*.'

Tegan recognised Kratt bouncing up and down on a broken metal crag,

several hands in the air. 'Ooh, ooh, I know! The mysterious enemies!'

'Don't give me that, a mystery isn't an answer!' snapped the Doctor, seeming

to reach a pinnacle of breathless fury. He waved at the glowing Echosphere with

an irate gesture. 'There's nothing in there. I've looked. No mysterious enemies,

no sudden asteroids, nothing. Queth isn't destroyed, it just ceases to exist. It just

drops out of all contact with the rest of the universe.'

Tegan blinked. Tut what could do that to a whole...'

Vrrum, went the Echosphere. In the gathering dusk the tangled ball of silver

thread was the only thing lighting the crater, and it had started to pulse.

Oh. Idiot question.

'Doctor —'

'I heard.'

All around, the armadillos were perking up at this turn of events, chattering

to one another and saying important things like, 'It went vrum!' Plong wriggled

in the Doctor's grip, bending up to see the 'Sphere, eyes boggling in the silver

light.

'It's beginning,' said the Doctor. Thoon got it back to front. His plan won't

save Queth from its fate, it is its fate. The more he tried to change the future, the

more fixed it became. Three minutes.'

Vrrum.

But... but... Chaugh couldn't be right. The future wasn't fixed. There was

always a choice.

'Stuff predestination,' Tegan yelled at him. 'Just reset the controls!'

Vrrum.

The Doctor looked at the 'Sphere, his expression hopeless. 'But there isn't an

enemy to target, I can't anchor the Schrödinger nexus. .'

'Forget the enemies, just shift it somewhere else! Wipe out a moon or

something.'

Vrrum.

The Doctor wrinkled his forehead, juggling ideas as if they were the threads

in the 'Sphere. He handed Plong to Tegan without looking, cracking his

knuckles. 'Well,' he said, 'I suppose there might be just *one* chance...'

Zzchming.

Not vrrum. Zzchming.

And then, where the phase-space map had been a moment ago, where

the

‘Sphere had been before, right in front of where the Doctor was standing, a

sphincter of space-time puckered inwards, shrank to a vanishing point of

nothing and popped out of existence. The Echosphere was gone. The world

shook.

‘Hurrah!’ cried the Gravis, antennae wiggling wonkily in enthusiasm. ‘I have

saved the day!’ It was standing in the mud behind where the ‘Sphere had been,

stained and bedraggled and vibrating with triumph. One flipper-shaped paw

was wrapped around a tiny, bulb-shaped lump of metal. Plong’s gun. Tegan had

wondered where it had got to.

‘I… have saved the day, haven’t I?’ asked the woodlouse, a tremor in its

voice.

As if in answer, the ground lurched suddenly under Tegan’s feet, throwing

her against a jutting cable support with enough force to ping-pong Plong into the

mud. There was a grinding howl from deep beneath the earth, rocks rumbling

against one another with the distant echoes of a sound like *zzchming*. The trailing

cables around the now vacant centre of the crater snapped and groaned as they

rode the shifting ground. A torrent of armadillos swept past, surfing a current of

mud and going ‘whee!’

‘It’s an earthquake!’ shouted Tegan, wishing she hadn’t felt the need to.

‘Tectonic disruption, certainly!’ the Doctor shouted back, fighting to keep his

balance on the ever-shifting mud. ‘Lumps of the planet disappearing, disturbing

the balance of the geological plane!’

‘What, and that’s different enough to be worth pointing out right now, is it?’

she yelled back.

‘It is if it means the TARDIS is closer than it was. Right, change of plan!’ he

shouted, his voice rising as the ground bucked beneath him. ‘Evacuation time!

The process is irreversible without the Echosphere, but there’s still one place

we’ll be safe. Plong! Kratt! Loff! Organise everyone you can and get them up to

the cave near where you found us. You’ll know the one, it’s full of liverwort and

a big blue box.’

‘What, put them all in the TARDIS?’ yelled Tegan. ‘Won’t that get you in

trouble with the Time Lords?’

‘Desperate times, Tegan,’ said the Doctor shortly. ‘Come on! All of

you!'

And with that, he grabbed an armadillo in each hand and set off, fighting to

stay vertical against the shuddering of the land as he pounded through the mud

in the direction they had first come. Like some mad cricketing pied piper, he was

followed by a trickle, then a flood of armadillos, swinging through the trees,

scampering across the mud on all six legs, and asking impatiently if they were

nearly there.

'Where are we going again?' they gargled to one another.

'Evacuation, he said.'

'Where's that?'

The ground bucked and shook, squeezing and shrinking to accommodate the

bubbles of space imploding out of existence all around, occasionally wiping out

some unlucky armadillos as the crater grew smaller by fifty-yard bites. Tegan

started after them, the grey-brown flood flowing uphill towards the ever-closer

site of the TARDIS, and safety. But, inevitably, she found her head turning back

towards the 'Sphere, or where it had been until recently. There was a large,

round hollow there now, subsidence or warped space from a particularly mighty

zzchming not far beneath. And slumped in it, half rolled into a ball and

making a

horrible blarting noise, was the Gravis.

It might have been crying. It might have been going to the toilet. But Tegan

was, to her constant irritation, a nice person at heart.

‘Gravis?’ she asked gingerly, wondering vaguely if the fact that the planet

was being wiped out of time as well as space meant they’d have longer or shorter

to get away. ‘Are you okay?’

The Gravis looked at her with huge, wet eyes as she approached. Of course

that might just have been because Tractators have huge, wet eyes, but she had a

feeling that this time it meant something. ‘You must leave me,’ it croaked as she

drew near. ‘I think I’ve sprained my metatarsus. And... I have doomed a planet

to oblivion. I deserve to die.’

Tegan looked at it, down in its hole. Oh, the temptation. ‘You’ve changed

your tune, haven’t you? Look what you were going to do to Frontios.’

It gazed at nothing, anguished eyes shining in the darkness. ‘I only planned

to give it a gravity engine,’ it pleaded. ‘Make it mobile. I thought.. I thought

space travel would be *fun*.’

‘Yeah. So did I, once,’ said Tegan, surprised by the bitterness in her voice. Out

of the corner of her mind’s eye, she could see Aunty Vanessa glowering at her,

unimpressed.

So this thing had doomed a few planets. Who hadn’t, these days? It had made

a few wrong choices... but at least it had made them.

Tegan made one too.

She tottered down into the hollow, grabbed the woodlouse under its stubby

paws, and yanked it to whatever it used for feet. The crater was barely more than

a dip in the ground now, the ground lurching every other second as the planet

ate itself into nothing. The cave with the TARDIS, if it was still there, could only

be a hundred yards or so away.

‘Brave heart, Gravis,’ Tegan muttered. She took the Tractator’s weight on her

shoulders, and together, wheezing and groaning, they trudged up the hill behind

the last of the struggling armadillos.

They might even make it.

Two minutes later, Queth ended.

Told you.

It was a wasteland. A cold, cracked plane strewn with rocks and boulders,

zigzag fractures exposing the darkness beneath. Scant stars shone

bravely in the

utter blackness above, pinpoint steady in the thin air.

‘What’s this?’ said Kratt. ‘This is *rubbish*.’

‘What are we going to *eat*?’

Tegan ignored them, picking her way across the fractured landscape to find

some stable ground. The laundry vortex in the TARDIS had done a good job of

returning her clothes and hair to their former glory, but she didn’t fancy her

chances with these heels.

Behind her, the Doctor shaded his eyes from the non-existent sun to look out

over the vast expanse of nothing very much. ‘Well, here we are!’ he said

infuriatingly. She exchanged glances with the Gravis, who rolled its eyes. It

wasn’t buying it.

She gave in. ‘Here we are where?’

The Doctor grinned, unrolling his stupid yellow hat. ‘Exactly where we were,

I hope. A few light years from the Yyb Fissure, second star on the right and

straight on till…’ He caught Tegan’s look just in time. ‘Kolkokron,’ he finished.

‘Straightforward materialisation reboot, except that now space-time has shifted

to repair the hole where Queth used to be. Hence the original mix-up with the

coordinates, you see.’

Tegan didn’t, but she saw no reason to point this out. ‘And this is where

we’re leaving the arma— the Queeth, is it? They don’t seem too pleased.’

The Doctor gave a distracted glance at the dozen or so creatures around them

— a tiny sample of the hundreds currently stowed away in the TARDIS, clinging

on to roundels, hanging from the hat stand and turning up unexpectedly in

Tegan’s wardrobe. ‘Ah, well, no,’ he said, with a preoccupied air. ‘Can’t disrupt

the timelines, you see. They have their own destiny.’

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They watched as a Queeth rolled past their feet, probably the victim of yet

another argument about who exactly the mysterious enemies were who had

blown up the planet. Away in the distance she could hear Plong shouting about

condom physics. It could only be a matter of time before Trehv trod in something

important.

‘Talking of which.. ’ The Doctor turned to the Gravis with a cough. He was

looking suddenly awkward, Tegan realised, hat bashed on to his head and both

hands stuck in his pockets. Abruptly, she remembered why they’d left Frontios

in the first place. To abandon the woodlouse here. Not that that wasn't exactly

what it deserved, she'd do it herself in an instant if she had the opportunity,

only...

Only...

The Gravis oscillated gently on the spot, looking as expectant as could

reasonably be asked of something with no facial muscles.

'I'm afraid this isn't going to be easy for either of us, Gravis, said the Doctor.

'I'm not very good at goodbyes, and you have proved yourself a very able

companion, but the fact is —'

The woodlouse wobbled. 'No,' it said.

The Doctor was taken aback. 'I'm sorry?'

'No, Doctor,' said the Gravis. It reared itself up backwards, antennae raised in

what seemed like determination. 'I know what you would ask, but I must

decline. I cannot become your companion.'

The Doctor drew a puzzled breath. Tegan kicked him before he could say

anything. He could be really very stupid sometimes.

'The truth is... I do not like space travel, Doctor,' rasped the Gravis, a hint of

shame in its croaky voice. 'I like... rocks. Rocks do not kill people, or have to

make terrible decisions. Or do brave things and then die. They are just rocks.' It

paused, the far-off whoops of colliding armadillos punctuating the silence.

‘Forgive me, Tegan. I am not brave or heroic like you. I shall remain on

Kolkokron.’

The Doctor looked... Well, it would be hard to say how he looked. Whatever

it was, he covered it up quickly, forcing a cheery grin. ‘Well, there we are, then!’

he beamed, or tried to. ‘Kolkokron. Yes, why not. Plenty of rare n-waves to feed

on, solar flare activity minimal. .’ He bounced gently on the balls of his plimsolls,

taking off his hat to glance up at the sky. ‘Gravity playful but not too cheeky. A

splendid choice.’

An odd look passed across his face: part relief, part dejection. He held out a

hand to the Gravis, who looked at it in alarm. ‘Well, no hard feelings,’ the Doctor

said manfully. ‘Probably for the best in the long run, the old girl’s getting a bit

full up, what with air hostesses and androids and things. And let’s face it, you

would never have fitted in an air duct.’

He grabbed the woodlouse’s unsuspecting flipper and gave it an affirming

shake that made the whole creature wobble. With a last, irresolute nod, he

turned on his heel, raising his voices to the armadillos, still rushing around

contradicting one another and falling off things. ‘Come along, Plong! All of you!

Change of scenery.’

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‘What’s a scenery?’ asked gargly chicken voices as they rounded themselves

up and fell off things.

‘It doesn’t matter, he’s changed it.’

‘Yes, but what *into*?’

‘ *Ulululu!* ’

Perched on their spur of rock, the Gravis sucked the dangly worm-things

back into its mouth with a shuddery breath. It might, Tegan realised, be the

Tractator equivalent of a stiff upper lip. ‘Farewell, Tegan,’ it croaked. ‘I hope...

you make a braver choice than I.’

She looked at it. Horrible thing. She was glad to be rid of it.

‘Oh, Gravis,’ she said. ‘I will miss you.’

If there was a message in the look it gave her, Tegan couldn’t read it. But she

could still feel it standing resolutely behind her as she tottered back to the

TARDIS, heels catching in every fissure. Back to comfort, back to the routine,

back to the big blue box, where the Doctor was urging the remainder of the

Queeth across the threshold. Back to being an idiot. *And* she’d broken

her heel.

She refused to look back.

‘One unwanted passenger down, 400 annoyed armadillos to go,’ she

snapped, her usual filthy mood restored. ‘What are we going to do with them?’

The Doctor picked up a particularly dense armadillo who was trying to walk

through the wall and threw it inside. ‘I told you, they have a destiny. We’ll take

them back to Queth.’

She gave him a look. ‘But… Queth’s been destroyed…’

‘It is a time machine, Tegan. We’ll drop them off 300 years or so ago, that

should give them time to evolve the sort of intelligence they’ve just wiped out.’

The Doctor located the last of the wandering armadillos, pushing them none

too gently through the oblong of darkness into an unseen space filled with

ululating confusion and cries of, ‘You’re standing on my *toe*.’

‘So. . wait a minute, they’ll be their own ancestors?’

‘Explains a lot. Nothing like inbreeding to grow yourself a Phoon or two.’

‘And… what they were saying about every planet they’d settled on being

destroyed…’

‘All Queth. All the same event, infinitely looped.’

‘And when you asked what senseless idiot had taught them about the

Schrödinger's Cat Principle? That was actually—'

'Yes, thank you very much for pointing that out, Tegan.'

She stared at him. Her head whirled. 'But isn't that creating a, you know, a

paradox? What about the laws of time?'

'It's been a long day, Tegan,' said the Doctor wearily, rolling up his hat. 'Let's

just let time work things out for itself for once, shall we?'

Tegan fought to understand. So the Queeth would flee from Queth to Queth;

evolve, and flee from Queth to Queth... Always remembering that their last

planet had been destroyed.. Always exploiting the Echosphere they'd find to

keep this planet safe... Always killing Chaugh, and destroying the planet, and

fleeing from Queth to Queth. Trapped doing the same idiotic, obvious things,

forever.

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Round and round the circle went...

'Tegan? Are you ready?'

The Doctor stood at the doors of his silly little spaceship, one arm flung into

the blackness within, towards the sound of argumentative squeaking.

So, drop this lot off, and back to Frontios. And then — who knew. Heroism.

Deaths unaccountable. Capture, escape, corridors; corridors, capture,

escape.

Round and round the circle went.

She gave in and looked back at the Gravis, already merrily levitating rocks

into the beginnings of a makeshift tunnel, back where it belonged. Maybe she

really was an idiot. Or maybe it was time to be brave at last. Maybe it was time to

choose. That was the thing about destiny. You couldn't live with it —

* * *

Queth ended.

And then, 300 years earlier, a box appeared. Four hundred squashed and weary

passengers disembarked, looked around them in confusion, and vowed— those with the

wit to do so — that this would be the last time. That they would not lose this New Queth.

Whatever sacrifice it took, whatever tools they could find, this time things would be

different.

And Queth lurched towards its fate, threading an n-dimensional line through

existence towards its inevitable termination.

This is why phase-space is so dull. Things cannot change. The five-dimensional line of

existence cannot twist at will through space and time: discontinuous, inconsistent,

lurching from catastrophe in the far future to disaster in the distant past, to a life in the

present, suddenly resumed. Destiny is just that. You don't get to pick the one you want.

You cannot choose your own adventure.

That's what makes real life so exciting.

144

Black and White

John Binns

An Adventure of the Fifth Doctor,

with Peri Brown

PART ONE

‘Hey! You could have helped me with a bag or two, you know.’

Peri regretted the petulant tone in her own voice instantly as she followed the

Doctor in through the TARDIS doors. After all, every one of the contents of the

four bulging carrier bags she had with her had been bought on the Doctor’s

credit account, so the least she could do was be nice to him.

‘Kidding. I’m kidding,’ she added quickly. But the Doctor’s breezy

demeanour showed no signs of his being upset by the remark. He could seem

like an eager young schoolkid at times, it was true, but she was confident he

could give as good as he got.

Sure enough, he shot her a sarcastic look as he propped the panama hat on to

the hat stand and hung up his coat. ‘You’re quite sure you bought enough?’ he

said, shooting her a mock-disapproving look.

‘Well, I reckon it’ll do for now,’ she said.

They’d spent the best part of the day shopping for clothes in Regent Street,

and frankly Peri was pretty darned pleased about it. Not that it hadn’t been her

due, all things considered, after a two-day stint stoking up a rebellion in some

dirty stinking twenty-fourth-century city and then — as if that hadn’t been

punishment enough for her — four interminable hours of cricket.

It had come as a very pleasant surprise that the Doctor was not only prepared

to make it up to her with a trip to London, but could steer the TARDIS accurately

enough to get them there in the right decade and — best of all, if she was honest

— was able to pull a favour and get them a suite on the top floor of the

Dorchester. Fair enough, he'd then done the guy thing and followed her

grudgingly around the clothes stores, looking thoroughly bored — he seemed a

lot more comfortable in Hamleys, actually, looking at teddy bears as if they were

some alien species or something; it was almost impossibly cute — but she had to

admit all the same that it was better than any date she'd had in a good long

while.

'Y'know, I think I could get used to this,' she said lightly as she dumped the

bags underneath the nearest panel of the console. 'Hitchhiking round the galaxy,

saving aliens from oppression.' She caught the Doctor's eye, and sure enough it

had a sceptical look. 'Occasionally dropping in to buy clothes, catch a show.'

He smiled at her, but it seemed to be a little forced. 'I still think Victor would

have hated that production, you know.'

She made a face. They'd been to see *Les Miserables*, and namedropping about

the author seemed like the only thing he could say about it. He'd probably carry

on until she seemed impressed. 'Yeah, well,' she said instead.

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He reached over and pulled the door lever. The low mechanical sound of the

doors closing heavily behind her felt a little weird for a moment, as if she were

being shut in. She felt the tiny detail of her St Christopher's between her fingers,

and shuddered at the rush of cold air from the ship's air conditioning.

Shaking it off, she said, 'Okay then, Doctor. I need to freshen up a little, put

my feet up. .' It took him a second or two to catch on.

'Of course,' he said. 'We need to find you a room.'

He set off quickly from the console room, as if seized with a new mission. She

barely had time to pick up the bags and follow him through the inner door.

God knows what she'd do if she didn't keep up with him and lost her way in

there, she thought suddenly. She'd seen enough of the TARDIS to know it would

take a long time to find her way back if she did. She was used to travelling and

making her own way around: she'd hitchhiked to Washington on her own,

backpacked around Europe with people she barely knew. But three days in to

this vacation, all space and time on the itinerary, she wasn't sure enough of her

new — what? Home? Or just a means of transport? — to feel safe walking

through it alone.

'Not so fast,' she called after him. But he was already rounding the corner,

and nearly out of view. She almost had to run to keep up with him.

'Let's see, let's see,' he was muttering to himself, and before long they were

walking through a corridor with him pausing at each door, looking puzzled

and/or looking in, shaking his head, looking puzzled again. She only managed

to see inside one or two of the rooms, but pretty much every one in this part of

the ship seemed to be stacked full of books, crammed in on rickety-looking

shelves, like those second-hand bookshops her dad spent hours in when she was

a kid.

'I'm sure there's a bathroom around here somewhere,' he said at length,

looking back at her as he walked, as if in an attempt at explanation. 'And one of

the bedrooms is round the corner from it, if I remember rightly. That could be

yours, if you like.'

She shrugged a little, not really knowing what to say. Pretty much anything

would do for her at this stage, she reckoned: she'd stayed in some rough places

in her time, after all, and her room with Janine at college wasn't exactly the lap of

luxury either. But she was glad at least Turlough's room wasn't the only one on

offer; even she had some standards to maintain.

'Sure,' she said eventually. But she couldn't be certain he was even listening.

It seemed like he was enjoying looking through the rooms in his own ship,

rediscovering things he probably hadn't looked at in years. She couldn't see him

making time to relax between travels, somehow, and she wondered how many of

those books he'd actually read. And was there really any need to read them

anyway, when you could just nip back in time and have dinner with the authors?

It seemed like an age before they turned into a much broader, homelier-

looking corridor, with softer lighting and a much subtler version of those

damned big circles that seemed to cover every wall of the ship. Much to Peri's

relief, he opened two doors opposite each other, and introduced what he called

‘the fifth bedroom’ and ‘the fourth bathroom’ to her.

She liked the look of the fourth bathroom a lot: unusually for the TARDIS it

seemed to have allowed itself a colour scheme, with a large deep blue bathtub

sitting invitingly in the corner. The bedroom was less impressive, not too small,

but filled with some pretty nondescript pine and bamboo furniture. She threw

her shopping bags on to the bed and sat her Hamleys bear on the bedside table,

but it didn’t make it feel any more like home.

‘The laundry room’s just at the end of the corridor,’ the Doctor said to her. ‘I’ll

leave you to settle in for a while.’ He looked eager to get away, as if standing in

the doorway of a young woman’s bedroom was the sort of thing that made him

uncomfortable. ‘How does dinner in a couple of hours from now suit you? I can

cook us something.’

She resisted the urge to sound impressed that the Doctor was capable of

cooking. Relieved was more like it, anyway: she’d half-expected him to live on a

diet of vitamin pills and water, and her expertise didn’t stretch to much more

than toast and eggs.

‘We can eat in the kitchen, just left at the end of the corridor,’ the Doctor said.

He pointed left, but headed off towards the right instead, adding, ‘If I’m not

there, I’ll be in the vegetable garden.’

He was gone before she could figure out her reaction. The vegetable garden,

huh? Yeah, she could live with that...

It turned out to be a fairly well-stocked vegetable garden, in fact, and the

Doctor had managed to rustle up enough to make a pretty decent stir-fry. She

found him in the kitchen as promised — she didn’t ask whether it was the first,

fourth or fifth kitchen — which turned out to be a large and formal-looking affair

almost like a small cafe. There was one dining table just a few feet away from the

cooking area, with four place mats and a candle, and four wooden chairs ranged

around it. A small, dusty wine rack sat invitingly in the corner. Feeling refreshed

and enjoying the aroma of the onions and mushrooms as they simmered away,

Peri sat back in her chair as the Doctor stood attentively over the wok.

‘So, I guess this has been a typical week for you so far,’ she said to him. ‘Space

adventures in the weekdays, then back home for some R and R at the weekend?’

‘Earth’s not my home, strictly speaking,’ he reminded her, looking back over

his shoulder with a small smile. ‘And no,’ he added, ‘I wouldn’t call it typical.

Come to think of it, though, I'm not sure what is.'

'Yeah, but this stuff isn't unusual for you, is what I mean. All the running

around and getting shot at. You do more of that than you do of the shopping and

the watching cricket.'

'Er... yes.' He didn't look away from his wok, and she had the sense that he

felt bad about it.

'I mean, it's okay,' she added. 'I like getting shot at as much as the next guy, I

guess. It's just nice to know we'll get some downtime once in a while too, you

know? Just to recharge the batteries.'

She got up and walked over to the wine rack, choosing a Californian white.

'I mean, I can see why you do it,' she went on. 'You know, guys like the

Master would just be running the galaxy if there weren't guys like you around to

stop them. And the slave workers on... what was it, again?'

'N'Tia,' the Doctor obliged her.

'Yeah. That's it.' It was going to take her a while to get the hang of planet

names.

'We couldn't just leave them there, I can see that. You got a corkscrew?'

He nodded and opened a drawer, then seemed to focus himself on turning off

the hob and fetching two plates from the cupboard. Peri persisted, though. It

seemed important.

‘What I mean is, I can see you’ve got some kind of a mission going on here,

you’re not just a tourist.’ She started opening the wine. ‘And, you know, I don’t

expect it to be all safe, or all fun; just as long as some of it is, then that’s okay.

Y’know?’

The Doctor was laying the food out on to the plates, and didn’t make eye

contact. ‘I’m glad you think that way,’ he said at length. ‘But you shouldn’t have

to. I don’t look for these battles on purpose, you know. And I don’t have any

right to put you in danger.’ He looked at her briefly, with what seemed like a

very sad smile. ‘You can always go home,’ he said.

Peri laughed at that, despite herself. ‘You’ve got to be kidding,’ she said. She

grabbed some matches from the table top and took the wine to the table. ‘Even

mortal danger’s better than living with Mom and Howard,’ she said. ‘I’m

serious.’ She lit the candle, and stared into the flame for a second as she realised

just how true that absurd statement really was. A sudden wave of relief came

over her, as it hit her just how far from them she'd travelled.

He came over to join her, put their plates of food on to the table. But he was

still avoiding eye contact. She decided to change tack. 'Anyway, thanks for the

shopping trip,' she said. 'I'll bet Turlough didn't get as good treatment for his

first week.'

The Doctor frowned. 'Actually, no,' he said. 'But then he was attempting to

kill me for most of the first few days, which I think makes him a special case.' His

delivery was so deadpan that she couldn't help laughing.

'Well, I guess we're both better off, then, huh?' she said. And he smiled again,

but for real this time.

'It wasn't his fault, actually,' he clarified, after a sip of his wine. 'One of my

enemies had him under their influence.'

'Okay, yeah. One of your enemies. Check.' She started on her meal. 'I'll bet

there are a lot of those, dotted around the cosmos.'

'One or two.' He shrugged.

'Well, hey,' she said. 'That's what you get for having a mission.'

He gave her that weak smile again.

'Thing is, you don't always have it that easy, I'll bet.' She caught his surprised

expression and added quickly, 'Working out who to fight with, that is. I mean,

you've got the Master exploiting people, you've got the N'Tians being oppressed

by those guys from whatsitsname...'

'Bagrabon.'

'Right, yeah. But what if it's species A versus species B, you know, and it's six

of one and half a dozen of the other? You must get that sometimes. Or maybe the

only thing you can do to help species B causes as much damage as species A

would have done without you. Must be hard.'

'That's true,' he said thoughtfully, almost to himself. He stabbed a mushroom

decisively with his fork. 'It used to be easier, I think. But sometimes it's not clear

at all what you should do. Or if you should do anything. If you followed my

people's rules, you'd never do anything at all. But I like to think you develop an

instinct for these things, over time.'

She looked at him for a moment, and thought he probably knew what she

was thinking. To judge on looks alone, you wouldn't think he'd had long enough

to develop such an 'instinct', at least not one you could be confident about. And

honestly, could there ever be time enough for that?

And he was frowning again. It seemed as though he wasn't convincing

himself either. She decided to give him a break.

‘So, tell me then,’ she said, leaning forward across the table. ‘How d’you

know Victor Hugo?’

The rest of the evening passed pretty pleasantly, and she climbed into bed at

11.30. Or at least, that’s what her watch said, which was still set to London time

from this morning; whether time had any meaning aboard the TARDIS was a

question that simply made her dizzy.

She lay awake for a good half an hour before she got to sleep. Just before she

did, she heard the sound of the TARDIS engines, faintly but as if from all around

her, as if reverberating through the walls. And though it was days since she’d left

her Mom and Howard in Greece, and since she’d stepped aboard the ship,

somehow this time she got a deeper sense of leaving something behind for good.

PART TWO

After he'd washed the dishes and put the pots and pans away, the Doctor set

the TARDIS back in motion again. It wasn't that he planned to go anywhere in

particular until morning, or at least he wasn't consciously thinking of that at the

time; nor was there any problem with the ship staying in his suite at the

Dorchester for another night. It was just that it seemed the right time to move on.

He spent a little time at the console, tinkering with room configurations,

before retiring to his study. There was something that had bothered him about

the way the rooms were structured at the moment, with all those library rooms

stored along one corridor. If anything happened there, a fire or a flood, he'd lose

almost all his literature in one go. It didn't bear thinking about.

He supposed it was what Peri had said earlier that made him think about

program five. He guessed it had been a few months since he had last looked at

the problem, and he was depressed to find that no new solutions had popped

themselves into his subconscious in the meantime. He could be reasonably

confident that the program wasn't going to overrun the TARDIS computer or

cause any significant memory problems for a good few years yet, but there was

little point in dragging it out if there was no better answer out there. Better to just

go right ahead and use the only solution he'd thought of, even if it did feel like

cheating.

Without meaning to, of course, the fact was that Peri had put her finger on

the exact nature of the problem. This really was a matter of 'species A' and

'species B', neither the obvious aggressor or victim, both living their virtual lives

inside the TARDIS computer. There was no clear necessity for intervention, no

clear time scale. It didn't shout out for a solution or give him a mandate to do

whatever needed to be done, no matter the consequences. It wasn't, in other

words, what he was used to.

And yet, the Doctor couldn't help feeling that for him, for someone with — in

Peri's words — a 'mission', something like program five shouldn't be hard to do

at all.

It should be a mild diversion to while away the hours; the Time Lord

champion's equivalent of a chess game or a crossword puzzle. Or a game of

cricket, perhaps. It certainly shouldn't defeat him, or present an insoluble

challenge. He shouldn't have to think of giving up or cheating. They simply

weren't things the Doctor should ever have to do.

He pulled on some clothes and headed back to the console room. Looking at

the program in its current state, he thought, taking a look at the state of play,

might help him intuit the answer, to revive that supposed 'instinct' he had told

Peri about. If he didn't have that, he couldn't help thinking, there really was a

good argument for spending the rest of his days watching cricket and taking his

companions on shopping trips. It would certainly be an awful lot safer than the

lifestyle he'd been leading of late.

He pulled a large wicker chair up to the console and started typing at the

computer keypad. A short sequence of keys and a password later — and just as

on previous occasions, part of him wished that he had never guessed that

password — the visual representation of program five flashed up on the scanner

screen.

The Doctor was surprised how far the program had progressed since he had

last looked at it. The relatively simple patterns of black and white pixels across

the screen had now become much more complex, with clusters of pixels forming

weird and varied shapes. A number of the black pixels had formed themselves

into discrete and evenly sized ‘bodies’, like virtual insects. The white pixels had

developed a more varied selection of forms, with long stringlike shapes jostling

for position amongst growths of what looked like ethereal forest.

There was a small amount of movement still, though it seemed more hesitant

and less frantic than the last time he’d inspected the program. It was clear,

though, that both black and white pixels had grown significantly in number; less

than a quarter of the screen now showed the green background colour. As for

which side was winning, it was now much clearer than last time that black had

gained the upper hand, swarming across the screen in greater numbers and with

better organisation than its white opponent.

Not for the first time, the Doctor couldn’t help but be impressed by the

program’s design: like all the best simulators of evolutionary pressures, its

parameters had been set in such a way that progress would often be

unpredictable and surprising. Just a snapshot of the program at this stage was

enough to show what a brilliant and creative mind had been at work in its

inception.

He looked away from the screen. Did it help him, he wondered, to be any

more certain that the black species was now in the ascendancy? It surely didn't

mean that he could be any more sure that intervening on behalf of white was the

right thing to do; it could just as easily mean that black should be aided to

dominate and achieve an evolutionarily stable state.

For a brief moment, the Doctor considered how the virtual species living

inside his ship might see him if and when he intervened. For generations in their

terms, they had only known each other; what kind of visitation would it be, for a

third party to arrive apparently from nowhere, like a force of nature?

One thing was for sure, he thought. The last thing they would expect would

be that their intervention had come from someone so hesitant, so unsure of what

it was he had to do, so very afraid of unintended consequences, that any kind of

deliberate intervention was now almost impossibly hard.

He ran his hands over the keypad, staring at the screen, as if willing the

elusive answer into him through his eyes and fingers. But the solution proved

persistent in its absence, as it always had.

Peri's watch told her it was around a quarter past three, and she assumed

from the dimmed lighting of the console room that the TARDIS must broadly

agree. Now that she thought about it, there was no reason to be surprised that

the Doctor was still up and about. Was there any reason to think he needed any

sleep at all?

The greenish glow from the scanner screen lent the room a pretty, eerie sort

of atmosphere, though, and there was something about the way the Doctor just

stared at it that she didn't much like. She had the feeling that if she just carried

on standing there and didn't say anything, it might be hours before he turned

round and noticed she was there.

So, 'Hey there,' she said instead. 'What's the video game?'

He seemed to start, and turned in the wicker chair. He looked oddly younger

and smaller to her than usual, out of that cricketer's outfit, wearing casual faun

trousers and a black cardigan over a plain white shirt, his hair a little messed up.

A pair of half-moon glasses that she'd never seen before set off the juxtaposition

perfectly. He looked more than ever like the earnest student, old before his time,

the weight of the world resting inexplicably on his young shoulders.

‘I thought you’d be fast asleep,’ he said to her. ‘You’ve had a long day.’

‘Well, what about you?’ she said. ‘Or don’t Time Lords need any sleep?’ She

took a few more paces towards him, leaned herself against the console.

‘It’s for tortoises,’ he seemed to mutter. ‘There’s plenty to get on with in the

small hours, you know. I’ve been known to go on a trip or two by myself.’

‘But not tonight, huh?’ She indicated the screen again.

‘Hmm,’ he said. ‘Yes, well, it’s a computer program one of my companions

devised, an evolutionary simulator. It’s been causing some problems for the

TARDIS’s memory capacity, and I’ve been meaning to sort it out for a little

while.’

‘And tonight’s the night for sorting. Okay,’ she said, and found herself trying

to suppress a yawn. ‘So this is like, I dunno, a simulated ecosystem, is it?’

He raised his eyebrows at her, she couldn’t help thinking out of surprise that

she knew some long words.

‘I didn’t flunk all my classes, thanks,’ she told him. ‘You’ve got two rival

species competing for limited resources, and you’ve got a system of

mutation

and selection. That's why you've got all those weird patterns coming through

with the black and white whatsitcalled...'

'Pixels.'

'Sure.' She looked back at the screen for a moment. 'Hey, you know a lot of

those white ones look like weeds to me,' she offered, but he just gave her that

pained look he sometimes did. Not that you need any help from me, I'm sure.'

He gave a noncommittal sort of look, and turned his gaze back to the screen.

A good few seconds passed with her waiting for him to say something else. She

wondered if she should just leave him to it and go back to bed, but she doubted

she'd be able to sleep for a little while.

'So why not just wipe the program, if it's taking up memory?' she said

eventually.

He seemed to wince a little. 'I'm afraid it's a matter of artificial sentience,' he

said, 'or at least it might be, depending on how the program turns out. I can't say

I'm terribly happy about just turning it off, certainly not at this stage.'

'Yeah, I guess so,' she said doubtfully. 'So it ends up living with us aboard the

TARDIS forever, then?'

He took off his glasses. 'No, certainly not,' he said. 'Once the program

stabilises and a sustainable ecosystem emerges, it'll be safe to deposit it

somewhere else. On Earth, in fact.'

She managed to look suitably impressed. 'Yeah?' she said.

He nodded. 'An interesting little place called the Proofrock-Mills Intelligence

Museum. Established San Diego, in the year 3009. Should be the ideal home for

it, I think. I've always meant to pay it a visit anyway, and I think the ship would

enjoy a chat with some of the residents.'

Peri shifted her position on the console a little, and thought she was probably

losing track of what the Doctor was saying. Maybe it was time to go back to bed

after all, she thought.

'It's just that I can't wait forever for it to stabilise,' the Doctor was saying, 'and

the program's running as fast as it can already. So I either deposit it before it's

stable and risk endangering the museum, or I give evolution a little... push.'

He gave her another of those weak smiles, and she did her best to smile back.

It seemed to her that he looked every bit as tired as she was, but she didn't like to

tell him as much.

'I'm sure you'll work it out,' she said. 'I'm going to go back to bed, I think.'

He nodded slowly, his mind clearly still mulling over the problem. She

felt a

momentary sense of annoyance at whoever it was that had set this program in

motion, creating such a headache for him. Couldn't they have helped him out

with it while they were still on board the ship? It seemed unfair to her.

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'Goodnight,' he said lightly. She was just about to kiss him goodnight when

he turned slightly in his chair, back towards the keypad. She considered

administering a hug instead, but thought it safer not to. For all she knew, after

all, hugs might cause Time Lords to have fatal seizures, or maybe make them

pregnant, both of which she could do without. So she just wished him goodnight

instead, and walked back to her bed.

It was a good hour or so before the Doctor finally made his decision. With the

TARDIS already drifting through the vortex, he did not have to wait long

between setting the coordinates and hearing the familiar chime of the central

column signalling their arrival. He reset the computer screen to display their

location, which read:

PROOFROCK-MILLS INTELLIGENCE MUSEUM

SAN DIEGO, USA

4.30AM, 8 AUGUST 3010

The scanner showed the museum's deserted entrance foyer, a giant and

sleekly designed affair in silver and chrome. He pulled the door lever and rose to

his feet in one movement, then turned and walked through the TARDIS doors.

The museum was dimly lit and cold. A single security robot stood at the

reception desk, and turned briefly to look in his direction. After a second or so a

red light flashed twice on its torso, which the Doctor took to be a sign that it was

unworried by his presence. He looked around him for some sort of guide to

which intelligences were where, and eventually worked out that it was behind

him: a huge display screen filled with lurid green text, resembling a departures

board at a rail station or an airport. He saw several entries that caught his eye

before he found what he was looking for, including:

FLOOR 5, ROOM A: 'PIONEER' (2857). EXPLORER PROGRAM

DEVELOPED FOR SECOND WAVE OF MARS TERRAFORM

PROJECT. VIEW FROM 9AM.

FLOOR 2, ROOM F: 'UNITY/COMMUNITY, FOURTH ATTEMPT'

(3004). MULTIPLE PERSONALITY PROGRAM, TAKEN OUT OF

COMMISSION BY SPANISH GOVERNMENT AFTER MADRID

RIOTS. VIEW ALL DAY.

FLOOR 9, ROOM C: ‘LOVE, (2897). FIRST KNOWN EXAMPLE

OF TWO INDEPENDENTLY DESIGNED PROGRAMS THAT

HAVE CHOSEN TO RUN IN TANDEM WITH EACH OTHER.

VIEW FROM 9AM. UNSUITABLE FOR CHILDREN.

And then:

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FLOOR 3, ROOM D: ‘BLACK AND WHITE’ (3009). SIMULATED

STABLE EVOLUTION PROGRAM WITH UNKNOWN

PROVENANCE, DONATED BY UNKNOWN BENEFACTOR.

VIEW ALL DAY.

He decided to take the stairs to the third floor. The first exhibit to greet him —

literally — was a field research program that someone had humorously designed

in the shape of a giant bloodhound, which looked at him dolefully as he entered,

and licked its lips. It was tethered to a man-sized post with a screen and keypad

set into it, which looked like some sort of visitors’ book. The Doctor peered at the

latest entry, which read: ‘Cute! I want one — Sarah and Michael Chambers.’

He thought for a moment and added: ‘Take it off the leash — The Doctor.’

He wasn’t sure, but he could have sworn the dog winked at him as he

walked

away.

There were dozens more such exhibits in the rooms that followed, some

similarly designed with human aesthetics in mind, others simply represented on

screens with explanatory notes and diagrams. Most had equivalent visitors'

books like the bloodhound's, and several also had other screens that showed

translations of what the intelligences were saying to each other. As a concession

to visitors, some of the exhibits had flashing lights or other indications of the

interactions between them. But otherwise, the Doctor had only the eerie feeling

that unintelligible chatter was going on around him constantly, conducted in

complete silence.

He found Room D after about ten minutes. Although it took him a while to

realise it, the exhibit he was looking for had been given pride of place, on a

massive screen taking up the whole of the wall facing the entrance. He barely

registered the holographic screen with its scant set of explanatory notes, which

noted in a gossipy sort of way that it had been donated in mysterious

circumstances the previous year, by what it called 'an anonymous benefactor and

friend'.

The reason he hadn't recognised the program at first was that it had changed

beyond all recognition. There was no sign of the black and white pixels forming

their various flora and fauna, and no trace of the green background colour he

was used to from the TARDIS scanner. Instead, the screen was filled with a

beautiful ocean of grey, smoothly swirling and flexing itself around in giant,

boundless shapes. He found himself drawn to it, staring as closely as he could at

the finest detail, but there was no sign of the rough pixel pattern he had

expected. He wondered how on earth it had been achieved.

The visitors' book was at the far left side of the wall, and he walked over to it

with some trepidation. Predictably, there was a range of responses from the

visitors, some simply not understanding it, others even finding it a spiritual

experience.

But it was the last entry that floored him most. 'You won't find the solution

for a while,' it said. 'Give it a regeneration or two — The Doctor.'

He read it a few more times to himself, even looking around him a little — in

the hope, he supposed, that he'd see a mysterious figure disappearing behind a

door, or a rush of air as the faint outline of a blue box disappeared from view.

But there was nothing.

He supposed he should feel reassured about this, but somehow it wasn't

quite what he had wanted. He looked again at the giant screen, and that swirling

mass of greyness. It was certainly beautiful. But now that he looked at it again,

the overwhelming sense he had was of something finally, permanently lost.

He stood there looking at it for a few moments longer, and then turned to go

back to the ship. Suddenly, he realised that he felt extremely tired. The walk back

to the TARDIS seemed to take a very long time.

PART THREE

Peri had to dust down the mirror on her dresser before she could look into it

properly: it obviously hadn't been used for a little while. The collection of

toiletries she'd picked up at Harrods looked a little meagre now that it had been

set out on the dresser, but at least her hair was in a better state now that she'd

picked up some decent hairspray. Not that the Doctor would notice, she thought

ruefully.

She counted herself pretty pleased with the new outfits she'd bought too, and

particularly with the top she'd chosen for today. Of course she'd no idea if where

they were going was going to be warm and sunny or bitterly cold, but she was

just going to have to deal with that as it came. There'd be no point in travelling,

after all, if you wanted life to be predictable.

And nor did she know whether today was going to be one of those days

where her life would be in danger. That, she supposed, was something else she

was going to have to live with. She stared at herself for a long time while she

pondered that, and said a silent prayer for her — and the Doctor's — safety. She

had a feeling that of all the people in the universe she could travel with, the

Doctor gave her just about the best chance of coming through each day alive and

unscathed. It was a warm, comfortable sort of feeling, to be cared for, one she

hadn't experienced for a good many years.

She left the room behind her and walked along the corridor to the kitchen,

where she busied herself for a while making coffee and breakfast. There were

even some eggs, which made her wonder whether the Doctor had some chickens

stored around here somewhere. She reminded herself to ask him sometime.

She was on to her second round of toast when the Doctor walked in.

'Morning,' he said lightly, and headed for the cafetière.

'You know, what we really need in here is something to play music on,' she

said. 'I brought some tapes with me, you know.'

The look of near-horror on the Doctor's face was priceless.

'Or I could play them in my room, maybe,' she added with a smile.

'I've set the coordinates for a really beautiful planet,' he told her. 'Sort of an

equivalent of your tropical rainforest. I thought it might appeal to you.'

'Yeah, okay,' she said. 'No being shot at today, then.' She was surprised

herself at the disappointment she heard in her voice.

‘Hopefully not,’ he said. ‘But let’s deal with that when it happens.’

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She took another bite of her toast. ‘So, did you manage to sort out the

computer program thing?’

He seemed to hesitate for a moment before replying. ‘Yes, eventually,’ he

said. ‘Not such a problem, really.’

She noticed he was avoiding her gaze again. ‘Well, that’s good,’ she told him.

‘I’ll bet you’re glad to have that out of the way.’

He took a sip of his coffee, and looked thoughtfully at her. ‘Yes, I am,’ he said

at length, and nodded. It was as if he was trying to convince himself of

something. But she got a feeling that there was no point in asking him about it

any further, and so she let it pass.

‘Okay, then. Rainforests,’ she said instead.

‘Indeed.’ He seemed to brighten up instantly, and raised his mug as if to toast

their new day. ‘I think I’d like to go exploring,’ he said thoughtfully.

It was the most hopeful thing she’d heard him say in a long time. She raised

her mug as well, and smiled broadly.

‘You know, I’d like that very much,’ she said.

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Curtain Call

Joseph Lidster

An Adventure of the Sixth Doctor

I think, by now, you can guess what this letter is for. It's to say goodbye.

It's coming up to midnight on 30 March 2006 and, as I write this, the rest of

the ward sleeps. They sleep not knowing what the new day will bring. Whatever

it brings for them, though, I won't be here to see it. I'll be far, far away. Saved by

the Doctor.

Firstly, I'd like to apologise to the nurses here. They've all been very friendly,

especially Karla and Gbemi. They've tried to see me as being more than just

another Section 3, cluttering up the NHS. I feel bad about leaving them because

they have tried to help me. Of course, if Dr Dominic Omosan had listened to me

in the first place, I wouldn't have been cluttering up anywhere. I wouldn't have

been taking a bed from someone who might have genuinely needed it. Because,

despite what Dr Omosan thought, I wasn't — indeed, I am not —

psychologically disturbed. However, as I'm about to embark on a new journey

I'll try not to show too much bitterness. This is a new day for me. A new day that

will see the start of my new life. For me and for the creature inside me.

Karla, Gbemi, Paul (who I would always meet as he returned from the

smoking garden — please, Paul, give them up) and those few others who will

even notice that I'm gone.. you've all tried to speak to me and learn about me

and, I believe the modern expression is, *reach* me. I know I've been somewhat

cold with you all but I didn't really know how to talk to you. Now I'm leaving

you, though, I can tell you what brought me here.

As you know, I'm Agatha Ellis. I am 36 years old and I was born in Hove

(which, despite what Dr Omosan may think, is not Brighton). My parents, Peter

and Molly, were, respectively, 53 and 46 when I was born. I think it's fair to say I

wasn't planned. However, 1970 was a different world to the one of today. Killing

unborn babies wasn't as popular. Therefore, my mother went through 12 hours

of labour which resulted in me entering the world. A side effect of my birth was

that she died. You can already see where this is heading, can't you? Only child

with a middle-aged father and no mother? That's right, it wasn't the best start to

life. However, I loved my father and he loved me. My earliest memory is of him

taking us to a beach (I'm not sure where — not Brighton, anyway) and digging a

huge hole in the sand. Then he asked me to pour the sand back on

him, which I

did. I remember finding it really funny that Daddy was stuck in a hole in the

ground. I think I stopped laughing, though, when he started to shout, ‘Look at

me! I’m like mummy!’

I can just see Dr Omosan’s report. ‘Ellis clearly had an unhappy childhood

with no mother and a mentally unstable father. She was also bullied at school.’

That bit is true. I was bullied at school. I remember my first day, which

apparently not many people do. I was five and I remember it was raining so I

had on these bright red Wellington boots. I was absolutely terrified about leaving

my daddy but, because I had the shiny, red boots that he’d bought me, I knew I

was going to be okay. I remember waving to him as he stood at the school gates.

He waved back and told me to work hard and make mummy proud.

I don’t recall when the bullying started. To be fair, at the beginning it wasn’t

so much bullying as segregation. I just didn’t know how to play with the other

boys and girls. I’d sit in the corner of the playing field, reading books about

pirates and investigators. There was another girl called Fiona and she’d been

born with a hole in her heart. She also had nits, which meant she was the first

one to appreciate how cruel the other children could be. Perhaps sensing that I

was in some way similar, she became my friend. We used to pretend we were

Nancy Drew and her sister. I'm not sure Nancy Drew actually had a sister but we

needed one so that we could investigate things together. The other children used

to pick on us because we were different but it didn't matter because we were

usually busy solving crimes with the Hardy Boys (who were actually invisible

but we worked with them anyway). Then, when we were both ten, she moved

away with her parents and I was left alone. The other children weren't exactly

sympathetic about my loneliness and started to call me 'Smelly Elly'. This

continued throughout junior school and only lessened a few years into secondary

school when the others began to develop individual personalities. By then,

though, it was too late for me. I'm sure it's the same for all of us: who we were

and how we were treated at school makes us who we are later in life. Only now,

as I'm about to go somewhere so very new and so very exciting, will I be

someone else.

So in secondary school, as we all matured, the bullying stopped but I

remained separate from the others. Always different. Actually, looking back, I'm

not sure I spoke to a single person for six years. Except for Dad, of course. But

then he died when I was 17. As the other girls in my year were going out and

kissing boys, I was burying my father. A side effect of this was that I failed my A

levels and had to leave school. I tried to look on the bright side. This would be a

new start. I could go anywhere. Do anything. I could be anyone. I got a job in

Woolworths.

Sorry about this, Karla. I know you especially don't like it when any of your

clients (`You're not patients, you're clients!') is maudlin but, frankly, just for

once, I'm going to be honest about who I am. For once, I'm not going to shut

myself away and pretend that everything is all right. It wasn't all right.

My three glorious years at Woolworths weren't anything to write home

about. I ensured that the pic'n'mix was fully stocked and that the top twenty LPs

were in the right order. And, occasionally, if I was 'lucky' and we got busy, I got

to go on the tills and exchange pleasantries with those who had ignored me at

school. Then, alone on the night of my twenty-first birthday, I looked

around my

parents' old house. Their lives trapped in photographs and china ornaments and

postcards from somebody called Mavis who lived in Clacton. Their lives

surrounded me and I knew, I knew I had to get out. I packed a few clothes into a

suitcase and took a taxi to the train station. Of course, because I didn't live in a

film, I wasn't able to just dramatically get on a train and leave, singing goodbye

to my old life. No, I had to wait overnight in the waiting room for the 7.32 to

London King's Cross.

Singing goodbye? Well, you'll know about that, won't you, Gbemi? Do you

remember how we both discovered that we shared the same love of old

musicals? That morning, a few weeks ago when I heard you singing *I Could Have*

Danced All Night and I said to you how much I loved *The King and I*. And you

said the same and we had something in common! And I told you how my father

had been a member of our local amateur operatics society and we talked about

which musicals were our favourites and you said *Sweet Charity* but I preferred

Fiddler on the Roof and we both agreed that *Seven Brides for Seven*

Brothers was just

a bit silly although we both liked Howard Keel! Looking back, that conversation

may have meant nothing to you. You probably forgot about it as soon as you

went home to Bayo (who I'm sure does love you). But I remember it! Every

word!

So, on the day after my twenty-first birthday, I arrived in London. The first

thing that surprised me was all the different types of people. Gbemi, you're my

friend and yet you're from Nigeria! In Hove, everyone had been, well, from

Hove. Suddenly, I wasn't just different from everyone else. We were all different

from each other! This, I knew, was a good sign. Because my father had been quite

well off, I was able to provide a deposit on a flat in Streatham. It was small but it

was new. That first night... I remember I was so excited. There I was, Agatha

Ellis, in my own flat in London! I'd done it. I'd escaped. It had been surprisingly

simple. A few days later, I got a temping job as a secretary at a local insurance

firm. I walked in with my head held high. The other girls welcomed me with

open arms and, at lunchtime, they invited me to a local café. They were eager to

learn all about me but.. I had nothing to say. I just didn't know what

to say! I

really tried, you know. I tried so hard to say words that might reach them.

Words they might be interested in. The silence became longer and more

awkward until one of them started to tell the others about the night out she'd

had with her boyfriend. I smiled and nodded as the others laughed and joked

and, then, I watched as the conversation just exploded. They talked over and

interrupted each other and three of them started talking about something else

before one of them knocked their sandwich on to the floor and the others

laughed and then, as she bent down, another noticed that the cafe had the same

tiles that she had once had on her kitchen wall and they all laughed as another

said she'd once been to a man's flat and he'd had this tacky picture on a wall and

she'd laughed and they all laughed and the conversations merged and became

this loud noise. And I sat there. In silence. Unable to contribute. I wanted to tell

them about my mother or the red Wellington boots or Nancy Drew or the

pic'n'mix at Woolworths but I couldn't. There just wasn't room in the

conversation. There wasn't room for me.

The next day, I stayed at my desk and ate a sandwich.

And for 15 years that is my life. My alarm clock going off at 7.00 and me

pressing the snooze button. At 7.15, me getting up and making a cup of tea.

Letting the tea cool as I take a shower, then drinking it as I get dressed. Leaving

the house at 7.45 and catching the 7.56 train from Streatham Hill. Arriving at

Sydenham at 8.18. Walking into the office at 8.24 and sitting at my desk.

Spending my day typing and then, from 1996 onwards, dealing with individual

insurance claims. Lunch at 13.00 which I eat at my desk and then, at 17.00, back

to the station for the 17.08 to Streatham Hill. Arriving back at my flat at 18.03.

Eating my dinner and watching television until 21.30 before retiring to bed and

reading for thirty minutes. Then, setting my alarm clock, switching off the light

and going to sleep. Five days a week. Fifty-one weeks a year (the other week

usually spent decorating or cleaning or recognising Christmas). For 15 years. One

hundred and eighty months. Seven hundred and eighty weeks. Five thousand,

four hundred and seventy-nine days. I could continue, but I think I've made my

point.

So you see, Dr Omosan, if I am in anyway disturbed or, as you laughingly put

it, ‘upset’, then I think I have a right to be. It doesn’t mean I’m mad or delusional.

It does. . it did mean, however, that I was susceptible.

It’s coming up to midnight on 30 March 2006 and I’m thinking about how,

nearly nine months ago, my life changed. Nine months. I wonder what’s that a

reference to? Haha, you’ll be laughing, won’t you, Paul? ‘All right, Agatha?’ you

used to say. ‘Getting fatter? Is Mr Kipling still really spoiling you?’ You and your

adverts! Always getting them mixed up. Seriously, though, give up the cigs. I’m

getting out of here. There’s hope for you too.

So, nine months ago and we’re in July. In fact, it was the last Thursday of the

month — the twenty-eighth. I was going through a phase of doing my shopping

on Thursday nights instead of at the weekends — as a break to my otherwise

mundane routine. Well, I say it was to break up the routine but I’d been doing it

for three years. I’d catch the 17.08 back to Streatham Hill as usual but, instead of

returning to my flat, I’d walk to the 24-hour Tesco. My shopping didn’t need to

take long as I bought the same things each week. Despite this, I used to take my

time because it was something to do. So, that’s where I was on 28 July

2005.

And that's when I met him.

It was shortly before 20.00. The store was practically empty. A group of

students was staring aimlessly at the crisps and snacks. A few other shoppers

were slowly and silently wandering down the various aisles. Everything was

bright under the fluorescent lights but you could tell it was the evening. There

wasn't the hustle and bustle that usually characterised such places. I was

standing at the frozen foods section, trying to decide whether to go for the ready-

made meal that was half price or the one that gave you extra Clubcard points.

Either way, the grey stuff inside the cardboard would taste the same. Suddenly, I

felt someone brush past me. I froze and wasn't sure what to do so I muttered an

apology then started to walk.

'No, I'm sorry,' called a voice.

I stopped walking.

'It was my fault,' he said.

I turned around. A man was standing where I had been. He looked to be in

his late thirties. He wasn't especially handsome, but his eyes were lit with... well,

with a passion for something.

He smiled at me. ‘You know what it’s like in these places. You wander about

like a zombie and end up forgetting there are others here. I’m sorry for bumping

into you.’ His smile was nice. Friendly.

I could feel my face burning red, so quickly thanked him for apologising and

turned back, hoping I could find something on one of the other aisles.

Later, I stood at the checkout, packing my food into two carrier bags.

Toiletries and household goods in one bag, food in the other.

‘We meet again!’

I looked up and there he was, behind me in the queue. I blushed and smiled.

‘lib!’ he exclaimed. Tesco’s quality meal-for-one range!’

I looked down as the conveyor belt continued to shunt my purchases towards

me. ‘Me too!’ he said loudly, pointing at his own purchases. ‘The name’s Godfrey.

Fancy a drink?’

Me? Agatha Ellis asked out on a date! Well, take your shocked expressions

and multiply them by, 0000h, a million. Then you might have some idea of my

own expression as I tried to concentrate on making sure the tinned food was at

the bottom of the bag and the eggs were near the top.

There was a dramatic pause, during which the chorus line of shoppers

could

have sung every song from *West Side Story*, and then I answered.

'Yes, please.'

After we exchanged names, he took me to a quiet wine bar next to the old

cinema. He held the door open for me (just like that handsome delivery man,

Karla!) and we went in. I could feel everyone staring at me. They were all so

young and good-looking. They looked like actors while I felt fat and ugly as I

clutched desperately on to my carrier bags. In fact, the whole place looked like a

set from some ITV drama special. There were so many colours and the music...

the music sounded a bit like jazz but with a modern dance beat which I actually

quite liked. The man, Godfrey, led me to a secluded booth and I carefully sat

down. The booth was dark with cream walls and a mahogany table and, when he

sat down opposite me, it felt as if we were the only people in the world. The

actors and the colours disappeared and I began to feel calm and even relaxed. A

waiter came over and asked what we'd like to drink. Godfrey asked for a

cappuccino. I had to hold my hand over my mouth to suppress a giggle. The

waiter looked down at me and asked what I would like.

‘The same, please.’

He left and Godfrey looked at me.

‘What’s so funny?’ he asked, smiling.

‘A cappuccino. I’ve never.. well, I’ve never actually heard anyone ask for one

before.’ My voice fell to a whisper. ‘I wasn’t sure they even existed in the real

world.’

Godfrey grinned. ‘You’re having one too!’

‘I didn’t know what else to ask for.’

He laughed. ‘Agatha, you’re amazing.’

I felt myself blush again as the waiter returned with our cappuccinos. Now,

they were amazing. The cups were made of pure white china and the coffee was

simmering beneath a layer of creamy-white froth. There was even a light skin of

dark brown chocolate sprinkled on to the foam. I felt like a film star.

And, for an hour, we talked. He asked me about my life and I told him. We

talked about the weather and, obviously, we talked about the terrorist attacks. I

told him how I hadn’t changed my journey. I was still taking the train to work

every day. He looked at me and, for a brief moment, reminded me of my daddy.

He looked proud and then I felt proud.

‘You’re a real individual, aren’t you?’ he asked, sipping at his cappuccino.

I looked down at the table. ‘Don’t be silly. I’m just doing what everyone else

is doing.’

Suddenly, as I remembered the seventh (or 7/7 as they’ve taken to calling it),

I felt sad. Not because of what had happened but because of how even more

lonely it had made me feel. I thought about the days following the bombings and

I thought about my workmates and the excitable people on the television. The

attacks seemed to have brought them all together even more. Everyone talking

about how they felt united and defiant. And all I’d been able to think about was

how I’d been the only one not getting any ‘1.7 OK?’ text messages. How, even

when something so terrible and huge happened, I was still alone. And, of course,

thinking that had made me feel so guilty.

Godfrey reached over and took my hand. I tried not to flinch and looked up.

‘We’re in a city of seven million and yet somehow you stand out. Everyone’s

carrying on as normal, including you, but…’ He shook his head again.

‘What?’ I asked, smiling.

‘I don’t know,’ he said. ‘You’re not like the others. You’re so… innocent.’

I looked down again and began to run my fingernail though the grooves in

the wooden table.

‘Agatha, can I ask you a question?’

I took a sip from my cappuccino. ‘Yes, Godfrey?’

‘I.. I... can we. . well, could we meet again?’

I nearly choked on the hot coffee as foam went up my nose. ‘I... well. .’

I trailed off, not sure what to say. He held on to my hand. ‘Please.’

I looked out of the window at the couples walking towards the station. I

watched as the world, as usual, continued to walk by. Then, after taking a deep

breath, I said I would like to see him again.

And so for the first time in my life, with my cappuccino and my friend and

surrounded by beautiful people, I felt like I was there. I felt like I mattered.

Stop laughing, Paul! I bet you’re thinking I’m making this up! I know — fat,

frigid Agatha in some hot romantic love story! Agatha who doesn’t drink or

smoke or even swear! Yes, I know what you say about me behind my back :)

Well, it’s true. A man wanted to take me out. I couldn’t believe it at the time

and. . well, perhaps if my life hadn’t been so different to everyone else’s, I might

have been more suspicious. But, after 15 years of silence, someone was talking to

me. Just over a week later, we met again outside the National Film Theatre. I'd

never been there before and couldn't quite believe that this was in the same city

as the endless grey- and red-bricked houses that I passed each day on the train. It

was so bright and modern and lively and exciting and... just special! It was like

all silver!

I was surrounded by silver and crystal and I was on a date! And not only

that, but it meant I was doing something at the weekend. When the girls asked

each other on Monday, 'Good weekend?', I would finally have something to tell

them. I'd be one of them. Godfrey took me to see a film called A Matter of Life

and Death. It was beautiful. A man was somehow given the chance to cheat

death because of his love for a woman. An angel was trying to take him away to

put things right but even he was moved by the love the two main characters felt

for each other. I don't think I have ever felt so affected by anything. Not even my

father's funeral had made me . feel so... emotional. It was pure love and... and I

cried my eyes out. I couldn't stop crying. I cared so much about them and that

was something I'd never felt before. I know, it's so silly, isn't it? That somehow I

might care more about two characters played by long-dead actors than I might

about anyone in the real world. We left the cinema and stepped out into the

blinding sunlight and, suddenly, the world had changed. I looked at the

laughing crowds as they mingled and chatted and ate and drank and walked and

sang and... and I was part of it! After a false start, Agatha Ellis had finally joined

the human race.

Godfrey wanted to take me to some posh Chinese restaurant but I begged

him to let us stay there. He bought us wine and we sat outside the cinema. He

listened as I told him about my parents and my childhood and my job and about

who I was. And, hours later, after the sun set behind the gleaming London Eye, I

found myself shivering in the cold night air. He smiled and he asked me if I

would like to go home. We climbed into a taxi, which drove us back to

Streatham. We pulled up outside my flat and there was a pause. The day was

over but I didn't want it to end. The taxi driver asked me if I was getting out. I

just sat there in silence. And, then, I asked Godfrey if he would like to see my

flat. We could have a cappuccino (I'd bought a machine!) and we could watch

my copy of *Fiddler on the Roof*. He asked me if I was sure. I smiled back at him

and we left the taxi. We walked up to my front door and, then, I let him in.

On Monday morning, the girls greeted each other with their usual stories of

drinking, parties and dates. I wanted to tell them. I needed to tell someone but I

was still in shock. I'd woken up on Sunday morning and Godfrey. . he'd gone.

No note. No goodbye. No curtain call. He just wasn't there. I felt so ill inside. At

first I tried to convince myself that he'd had some kind of family emergency. I

desperately tried to think about what he'd told me about himself. I realised,

though, he'd told me nothing. I'd been so thrilled about someone paying me

attention that I'd selfishly not enquired about him. I didn't know if he had any

family or where he lived. I didn't even know his surname. For the first day in 15

years, I didn't hit my targets at work. This upset both myself and my manager so

the next day I resolved to pull myself together. I wasn't the first woman to be

duped by a man and I probably wouldn't be the last. As the days and weeks

passed, I tried to forget about Godfrey and resigned myself to the fact that my

life was never going to have that moment when the heroine bursts into song as

her life changes and everything builds towards the happy ending.

Then, over a month later, I realised there was something inside of me.

Something alien. I went to see my GP, Dr Omosan. He did tests and confirmed

what I already knew. I was pregnant. I didn't know how to feel. I was both

terrified and excited. Terrified because I didn't know what to do. My life was so

structured and settled and... I was me. I'd never really felt or been shown love so

what if I did that to my child? What if I brought another 'Smelly Elly' into the

world? Then I told the girls at work and their excitement was contagious. They

bustled around me, offering me food and baby clothes and suggestions for

names. Suddenly, life in the office revolved around me. They were also excited

about mine and Godfrey's forthcoming wedding. I couldn't let them think I was

having a child out of wedlock so decided that my fiancé would have an accident

beforehand.

And for four months I am alive. I'm happy. I'm someone.

Christmas Eve 2005 and, for the very first time, I was excited. The girls had

given me so many presents. All right, I'd be opening them by myself but at least

they weren't just from myself. I'd arranged them all around the little silver tree

and, gently rubbing my stomach, had gone to bed. As I lay there, listening to the

wind outside, I spoke to my baby. I promised I would never let it be lonely or

sad. I would make sure it was always someone special.

Suddenly, I woke up as I heard someone in the room. I desperately tried to

reach for the light switch but then... two small pools of white light appeared at

the end of my bed. They started to shine brighter and brighter, lighting up the

room. It was brighter than daylight and I had to shield my eyes. I tried to move

but couldn't and then I saw him.

Godfrey was stood in front of me and the silver light was shining out of his

eyes.

I tried to speak to him but no words came out. And, as I watched, he reached

forward and placed a hand on my stomach. Suddenly, through my skin, I could

see my baby. It was glowing, reacting to his touch. Godfrey's mouth was moving

as if he was talking and my baby was glowing like bright mercury and...

Then it was morning. After about an hour, I stopped screaming and phoned

Dr Omosan. He was clearly annoyed at having his Christmas Day spoiled but I

continued to shriek down the phone at him. I needed to have this thing taken out

of me. I cried as I told him about what had happened and how, if he didn't come

and help me, I'd take it out myself. He told me to not to upset myself and that

he'd send someone to help. I believed him.

They brought me here — to the home we all share. The psychiatrist was very

nice and explained it all to me. I was being detained under Section 2 of the 1983

Mental Health Act (although I was quickly promoted to Section 3 after they

caught me with a pair of scissors on New Year's Eve). Apparently, I was a risk to

both myself and my child. They didn't care that we were all at risk. They were

too busy doping me up with something called Lorazapam. I don't know what's

in it but it makes me sleepy so forgive me if things seem a little hazy from here.

Although I was tired, I never slept. Every night, I'd lay awake in my little pink

room waiting for Godfrey to return. You'll remember how I never spoke to any

of you for weeks. I was so paranoid and... I vaguely remember that time I

attacked you, Paul. I am so sorry about that but I really thought you were one of

the aliens. In fact, that's about the only thing I can remember until a few weeks

ago. And that's when someone else came into my room.

It was 03.24 and I was sipping a glass of water. I had to sip it slowly as they

didn't allow me to have much. Apparently, a week before, they'd caught me

pouring jugs of water down my throat, trying to drown the creature or

something.

I don't really remember. So, I was sipping the water quietly, listening to the

sound of everyone sleeping when, suddenly, my door opened and a head

appeared. He raised a finger to his mouth and, when it became apparent that I

wasn't going to scream, he came in. He was tall and engulfed in a horrible multi-

coloured coat. He had fair curly hair and he looked as though he hadn't slept in

years.

'Agatha?'

I nodded.

'I'm the Doctor.' He smiled at me. 'How do you do?'

I just shrugged as he walked towards me. Then, taking my hand in his, he

spoke again.

'I believe you.'

‘What?’ I whispered.

‘Go to sleep. I’ll come back tomorrow.’

And I did. I went to sleep. I’ve no idea what he did but I suddenly felt safe.

The next night, he came again.

‘How are you tonight, Agatha?’

‘Who are you?’ I asked.

‘I’m the Doctor and I’m here to help you.’

I looked into his eyes. They looked as though once they might have sparkled

with life. Now, though, they seemed dull. Old. I asked him if he was all right. He

looked surprised at the question and told me that he was fine. He reached into

his coat and pulled out a bottle of misty, blue liquid.

‘What’s that?’

He explained that it was a herbal remedy. It would help me sleep at night so

that I could be alert during the day. He would make sure Godfrey didn’t return. I

didn’t even question him. I just let him pour a few drops into my water. As I

raised the glass to my mouth, I paused. ‘Can we talk?’

‘You need to sleep.’

‘You believe me. You understand that something’s happened to me. You’re

the only one I can speak to.’

He took the glass out of my hand and we talked. That night I told him

about

my life. He understood and sympathised. He said he knew what it was like to be

an outsider, to be lonely. Then he told me who he was. Are you ready, Paul? You

ready for this? He was an alien! A real alien! How crazy is that? But, for some

reason, perhaps because of Godfrey or perhaps because of being in this place, I

instantly believed him!

He was from a planet called Gallifrey, but he'd left it because he hadn't got on

with the other aliens. He was travelling the universe in a time machine with a

young woman called Melanie Bush. Apparently she was from Pease Pottage, so

not too far from where I'd grown up. That was obviously the only similarity

between the two of us, though. She was travelling the universe, fighting

monsters and helping people whereas I'd moved to London to process insurance

claims. I said I would like to meet her but the Doctor wasn't sure. Apparently,

they'd just been to this planet called Caliban and something there had upset

Melanie. I asked what had happened but he avoided the question. He told me

that he knew what Godfrey was and what he'd done. He wouldn't let

anything

happen to me. Satisfied, I drank the cloudy blue water and slept.

This continued day after day, night after night. A new routine but one that I

enjoyed rather then endured. Each night, I'd talk to him and then sleep and each

day I'd feel that little bit better. I can't explain how he did it but he saved me.

One night, we talked about change. He told me about how he'd changed so

much in his life (although, oddly, he talked as if he'd had other lives).

Apparently, when he'd been younger he'd been different. He told me how he'd

been sad and confused and violent and, well, he described it as suffering from a

sickness. Smiling, I said how he was in the right place here, but then I stopped as

I saw how serious he had become. It felt weird having someone confide in me.

His face was dark as he told me about fighting aliens and vampires and how

he'd felt like he'd been trapped with a monster inside of him fighting to get out.

His voice was getting more and more agitated. As we sat there, in my little dark

room, the paint peeling from the walls and the eerie sound of wind whistling

outside, I shivered and asked what had changed him. He took hold of my hand

and whispered, 'My friends'. I quickly pulled my hand free. I'd never had that.

Never known it. Not since all those years ago when Fiona left me had I felt that

thing called friendship. He told me about someone called Peri and how she'd

helped him to keep going. She'd trusted him and stayed with him and her

friendship was what had changed him. I tried not to sneer but he looked hurt at

the expression on my face.

'That's what friendship is all about, Agatha. Trusting someone to be there for

you.'

Again, I tried not to react but then he said, 'And that's why I'm here. I'm here

to be your friend.'

I started to cry. Perhaps, had my life been different, had I allowed myself to

have friends, then I could have changed. I could have been someone else.

'Oh, I'm so sorry,' he said quietly. 'I didn't want to upset you.' And then he

told me about how he'd also travelled with a talking penguin and we both began

to laugh.

Gbemi, the next day was when you and me talked about musicals and you

told me about Bayo cheating on you. And, after each night of talking to the

Doctor, I now found myself able to talk to you a lot more. I forced myself to tell

you how I was and to listen to you tell me things. I even convinced you to stop

giving me the Lorazapam.

A few nights ago, I finally asked the Doctor what we were going to do about

the creature. He looked at me, his face half lit by the bedside lamp. His eyes

stared right into mine.

'It'll be born and then I'll take it away.' Suddenly, he smiled. 'You could

always come with us if you like?'

I shrugged, sipped my blue water and slept. I dreamt of travelling the

universe with the Doctor and Melanie. The three of us, together.

And then, tonight, something terrible happened. I was waiting for the Doctor

to come and see me when, suddenly, I felt the creature inside of me move. I

looked down at my own belly and saw that it was glowing again. The silver light

was shining through the blankets and lighting up the room. Before I had a

chance to scream, I heard someone talking in the ward. I climbed out of bed and

went over to the door. I eased it open and looked out. Godfrey was there. He'd

come back! Then, from behind one of the concrete pillars, I saw the Doctor

appear. He stepped towards Godfrey, who suddenly lunged at him.

Then, as the

Doctor told him to leave, Godfrey's eyes opened and the silver light shot out. The

two streams of light shot into the Doctor's eyes and I listened to Godfrey

taunting him.

'Witness the future, Doctor! Just as the woman can't escape her fate, neither

can you escape yours.'

I wanted to run out, wanted to save my friend. But, as they rolled around,

scattering tables and copies of *Woman's Own*, I stood still. Frozen to the floor. The

Doctor managed to roll on top of Godfrey and hissed at him. His face was so. .

angry! I've never seen anything like it! He told Godfrey that he would save me as

he himself had been saved. He also said something rude about fate, which I

won't repeat here. Then, laughing in his horrible, horrible way, Godfrey just

faded away into nothing. I watched as the Doctor slowly stood up. He looked

around the empty ward and carefully began to put the magazines back on to the

table. He looked so quiet and thoughtful. I watched as he tidied everything up

and I watched him take one long deep breath before starting to walk towards my

room. Quickly, I closed the door and got back into bed. He came in and, without

a word, poured some blue drops into my water. I asked if he was okay and he

shrugged, forced a smile and stood up.

‘Agatha, I’ll be back tomorrow and I’ll take you with us. The three of us can

go anywhere and do anything. Nothing can stop us.’

And he vanished once more into the darkness.

There’s a problem though. I want to go with them, I really do, but I can’t. I

heard what Godfrey said. Wherever we go, I’m always going to be me. I’m

always going to be Smelly Elly, sitting by herself at the edge of the playing field.

The little girl that nobody wanted. I’ve tried so many new starts. School.

Woolworths. London. Each time, I’ve still been me. Unable to change. Writing

out this letter has convinced me of what I need to do. It’s okay though, Doctor,

you’ve still saved me. You were so shaken by your fight with Godfrey that, after

you’d given me those precious drops of blue, you left the bottle behind. I’m

looking at it now. The lamp is shining through the glass, bathing everything in a

comforting pale blue light. You were always so careful to only give me a couple

of drops each night...

.. and I’ve drunk it. Every I mean drop not pill. No pills. Something’s

happening. It’s darker. The creature inside me isn’t moving so now

we'll all be

safe. And, yes, I'm definitely dropping off. I know this is it so I just want to

apologise to you all for not being able to be someone else. Karla, Gbemi, Paul, I

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hope you all live long, happy lives. Doctor, thank you so much for being my

friend and I hope. . I hope you and Melanie find happiness on whichever path

you take. It's 23.59 now. One minute to midnight. This is my curtain call. Who

knows? Maybe I'll see you on the other side. Maybe we'll

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Utopia

Darren Sellars

An Adventure of the Seventh Doctor

The digits on the clock face began to melt; the numbers breaking down,

stretching and contracting by equal measure — the glowing red characters

morphing smoothly into a new moment in time — Monday morning, 7.00am.

Registering the time, the shutters on the panel windows came silently to life.

They lowered in unison with an aria that drifted effortlessly from speakers

hidden nearby. Dull light flooded into the office, increasing as the

shutters sank

into the wall below, running parallel to the ascending pitch of the anonymous

alto.

The light shone through Morgan's eyelids as he stood by the window. He

smiled: he hadn't felt this energised for some time. Opening his eyes he was —

for a split second — disappointed by the view. Rain streaked down the glass,

partially obstructing the view outside: the weather filters were on the blink

again. Damn things, he cursed, haven't worked in days. He was glad to finally be

leaving. When he founded the Genetic Nuclei Exploration Corporation all those

years ago, things were so much easier; he had fire in his belly back then. That

was before the board took over and 'diversified' as they were so keen to state on

numerous occasions.

Now all that was left of his originally proposed project was in this office. Fifty

years of research condensed into one small space, while scientists — not even

born when the company was founded — worked on projects he had never even

heard of just one floor in either direction. He was in a cell of his own making.

Nevertheless, until his official retirement later this week, he was still technically

in charge...

He gazed out through the torrent of water on the pane on to the plaza below,

and felt a brief glimmer of pride. A well-ordered mass of gleaming white spires

stretched outwards from the building he stood in; reaching for the heavens.

Symmetrical, ordered, perfect. That was his legacy — success.

Others had not been so lucky. During his life he had been witness to several

of his peers falling by the wayside, undone one way or the other. Dennerman

was the most recent, murdered mere weeks ago. So much for refusing

governmental protection; if the terrorists were that determined to undermine the

scientists' work, he was glad to accept the ministry's money.

Still, as far as he was concerned, after this morning the uncertainty was

behind him. It was over. Once the contracts were collected, he need never have to

worry again.

He glanced over at the papers spread out on his desk, then at the clock: the

glowing red numbers stared back, partially obscured by the crystal turtle-shaped

paperweight that stood inches away. Just over two hours now. Two hours until

the man from the ministry arrived to collect the contract — the fruition of his

life's work. He stared at the blank space where his signature would go.

time, he thought. It had taken him so long to get to this point; he was determined

to savour every last moment. For a brief second he considered re-reading the

contract one last time, then dismissed the notion as paranoia and returned to

gazing out of the window.

He heard the door to his office slide open behind him: his PA.

‘Élan, until the man from the department arrives could you make sure I’m not

disturbed, please?’

There was no response.

‘Élan?’ He turned. Where he expected to find his assistant stood a small man,

dishevelled and unimpressive, dressed in a white linen suit. He stood, propped

up on an umbrella by his side — the oddly shaped handle held tight in his left

hand; in his right, a manila folder. He had a grave look on his face.

‘Can I help you?’ said Morgan archly, more etiquette than a question.

‘No, thank you, Mr Sturgess,’ replied the man, a Scottish twang to his voice.

‘I’m actually here to help *you*.’

Morgan was flustered, taken by surprise; he wasn’t expecting them so early.

‘Have you come about the papers? I’m dreadfully sorry, I wasn’t

expecting you

for another two hours or so. My assistant didn't tell me —'

The man stopped him mid-sentence.

'No, Mr Sturgess, I'm not from the ministry. I'm what you'd call a...

concerned party.'

Morgan snapped back — annoyed by the man's presence — as he moved to

his desk. 'I think you had better leave.' He pressed the intercom buzzer on his

desk. 'Élan, call security — we have an intruder.'

The intercom responded with white noise.

He tried again. 'Élan?' He fumbled at the intercom, desperately attempting to

contact back-up. 'Hello, security? Are you there? Hello.. Hello? Anyone?' Again,

static echoed back at him.

The intruder began to stride towards Morgan, the umbrella twirling in his

hand as he walked. 'I can assure you that I'm not here to hurt you, Mr Sturgess.'

Agitated by both the man's impudence and the malfunctioning intercom,

Morgan let out a frustrated grunt and stormed towards the door to his office,

pushing past the trespasser as he did so.

The intruder responded with calm indifference as Morgan thundered past

him. He reached the door. It remained firmly shut.

He backed away and looked around the seal in confusion — aware of the

small man's eyes burning into his back — and made to leave again. Still nothing.

In frustration, he jabbed at the operation panel by its side in an attempt to open

it. No response.

'I would prefer it if we were undisturbed,' the man remarked.

Morgan spun to face him. 'What do you want?'

'Only to talk.'

Morgan was livid with impatience. 'Talk?' he spat.

'That's all, Mr Sturgess. To talk. I assure you it won't take long.'

'No demands?'

The man met Morgan's icy gaze with one of his own. 'I would be lying if I

said there were no demands, Mr Sturgess. I *do* have a favour to ask of you.'

'And what would that be?' enquired Morgan. He began to cautiously

approach the man.

'To cease any further exploration into the research you are conducting, Mr

Sturgess. Destroy the materials you have, and forget your research ever existed.'

Morgan snorted with laughter; the man was quite obviously deranged. 'Oh, is

that all? I advise you, my friend, that if that is your agenda, then you should give

up any attempt right now and leave. I refuse be threatened.'

'Oh, I'm not here to threaten you, Mr Sturgess.. simply to advise on a course

of action.'

'And if I don't follow your... advice?'

'The results would not be pleasant,' the man replied.

Morgan's eyebrows rose at this response. 'No threats, eh? That was -a

promise easily broken.'

'It wasn't a threat, Mr Sturgess. Merely stating a fact.'

Morgan blanked the man, and began the walk back to his desk. 'I have no

interest in what you have to say. Get out.'

'You will be interested, Mr Sturgess...'

Morgan's pace quickened; as far as he was concerned this conversation was

over.

'… it concerns the Utopia project.'

Morgan froze.

He turned to face the man. 'The Utopia project is not in the public domain.'

'Of that, I am aware,' the man stated, matter-of-factly.

Morgan's eyes narrowed. This was certainly a well-informed protestor. Not

even the lower-ranking members of the boardroom knew about Utopia. 'Who are

you?'

'Oh, yes.' The man suddenly looked apologetic. 'My apologies for being so

rude. I'm the Doctor.'

Morgan tilted his head, curious. 'Doctor.. ?'

'Just Doctor will do for now, Mr Sturgess.' It was obvious that he was not

willing to offer any further information.

'Just what is it that you're a doctor of?'

'Presently, I have an interest in genetics.'

'It must be a very *keen* interest to know of a project that doesn't officially

exist...'

The Doctor's gaze wandered. 'Oh, I keep my ear to the ground, Mr Sturgess

— you know how it is,' he replied, pacing the floor.

Morgan turned and traversed the last few metres to his desk and made a

show of picking up the papers that lay there. 'I'm afraid I don't. Industrial

espionage was never a strong point. I'm sorry, Doctor, if you want secrets I can't

help you. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm a busy man. If you want to learn more

about the basics of genetics, I suggest you visit a seminar or chat to someone

else.'

'I already tried that, Mr Sturgess.. but I was unable to reach him: Albere

Dennerman.. I believe you know him.'

Morgan looked up from the papers. ‘Dennerman died several months ago.’

The Doctor’s face dropped. ‘Yes, I know… Unfortunate business.’ He saw the

look of distrust on Morgan’s face.

‘I assure you, the unfortunate events surrounding Mr Dennerman were not

my doing. But, nevertheless, now that I have your attention…’ He turned and

stared Morgan in the face. ‘I have to warn you, Mr Sturgess, as far as the Utopia

project is concerned, you’re playing a very dangerous game…’ His glare

remained fixed on Morgan as the words drifted out between them.

‘Dangerous?’ Morgan balked — as much as he didn’t want to discuss

anything with the horrible little man, he found his pride getting the better of

him. ‘With my work, entire strains of disease could be wiped out! Things never

thought curable centuries ago could be eradicated now before a child is even

born — diabetes, heart conditions, skin cancer — anything. We could erase

genetic abnormalities from a person’s entire family tree. Healthy children, Doctor

— just imagine it. And you have the nerve to tell me that’s dangerous?’

‘I commend you on your enthusiasm, Mr Sturgess. However, implanting a

lab- created gene directly into the foetus, pre-implantation genetic diagnosis?’ He

surveyed his surroundings as he spoke — a bustling photographer taking a

mental picture of the layout and contents of the environment. ‘If I recall, that was

tried before in the early part of the century with little success. . Gene therapy was

one thing but...’

‘Gene therapy was a dead end! Inserting healthy cells directly into the

patients had no lasting effect — a trait in the human body couldn’t be changed

by just one gene. There could be as many as ten, fifty, even a hundred affecting

the feature in question. Fifty years ago scientists were only capable of looking at

two at a time. You would need hundreds of embryos in order to sift the genes

needed to bring out a single facet of a personality. PGD was impossible! Today,

thanks to GENECORP’s research, we can clone thousands of embryos in these

labs!’

The Doctor moved closer, and Morgan suddenly realised that despite his

diminutive size, he was no less intimidating than a man double his height. He

couldn’t quite put his finger on it, but the man seemed larger in some odd way.

‘That’s all well and good, but how much further could that research be taken, Mr

Sturgess... eradicating the gene that produced skin tone for instance? What about

height? Weight? Shyness? The gene that some believe leads to homosexuality?'

The Doctor's eyes widened as he continued to probe inquisitively. 'Just how

much of a jump would it be to create the perfect designer baby, the perfect

human. A master race: more intelligent than its peers, with greater longevity,

stronger, faster, more able to survive? That's when it becomes dangerous. Racial

purity, Mr Sturgess. I've seen it. It's not all it's cracked up to be.'

Morgan was growing tired of arguing his point against some stranger whose

only objective seemed to be to refuse to listen. He had done enough of that over

the years and he'd be damned if he was going to defend his work on this, his last

day on the project. 'The Utopia project is not a passport to racial purity, Doctor. It

is a health programme — created to benefit mankind.'

'Well, lots of people *claim* benefits, Mr Sturgess, without being entitled to do

so...'

The Doctor fumbled in his pockets and, after several seconds, held out a

paper bag towards a surprised Morgan.

'Would you like a Jelly Baby?' he enquired, apparently changing the subject.

Morgan eyed him dubiously, regarding the proffered item with suspicion.

‘I assure you, Mr Sturgess, they’re quite safe. Here.’ He removed a solitary

brightly coloured object from the bag and placed it in his mouth. ‘I used to have

a tremendous fondness for them myself,’ he continued wistfully, talking as he

chewed. ‘Never used to be without the things. I’ve only recently rediscovered

them.’

Tentatively, Morgan reached into the bag and took one — it was pink, dusted

in a strange white powder, and, he thought, obscenely foetal. Deformed even.

The Doctor seemed intrigued by Morgan’s choice. For all the light in the

room, Morgan could have sworn the other man’s eyes darkened somewhat.

‘Do you know you can no longer get them?’ the stranger informed him, a hint

of sadness in his voice. ‘Several years ago the company producing them decided

that the range of colours on offer was too great. They could save themselves a

fortune, simply by eliminating just one colour. The colour you hold in your

hands.’

Morgan placed the sweet in his mouth and began to chew. It was sickly

sweet. The Doctor smiled. ‘Afterwards,’ he went on, ‘they patted

themselves on

the back for making the company such a vast profit. But the curious thing was, a

great many of the customers who bought the confectionary actually liked that

colour. Not the green, or the orange or even the black — but that one. Of course

it made no difference to the taste. No, it was nothing as tangible as that. They just

missed that colour being in among the rest. The opportunity to choose *that* one in

particular above all the rest.'

As if to illustrate the point, the Doctor peered into the bag in his hand.

When he looked up he did so directly into Morgan's eyes, unblinking.

'Millions stopped buying the things. Some wrote to the company asking them

to reinstate the pink ones, but to no avail. After all, what did they know? It was

only one colour: not worth the money it took to produce. A simple, aesthetic

variation. Quite silly for people to feel so strongly about something like that, and

yet people do, don't they?'

Morgan felt inclined to nod in agreement, despite being unsure as to why.

'So, the company simply brushed the concerns aside. The only colours that

concerned them were green in the wallet and black at the bank. Unfortunately,

the losses the company received as a result of that decision far

outweighed the

profits they had made by stopping production. They couldn't have foreseen it

because it was a quirk of humanity, and they couldn't respond to it because you

can't justify something that simply is. .'

Morgan found the tone of the Doctor's story to be as insipid as its subject, and

as difficult to swallow. 'Forgive me, but is there some point to all this?' he

demanded tersely. 'Or are you simply a lobbyist with a sales pitch to flaunt?'

The stranger smiled distantly. 'Those that do not learn the lessons of the past

are doomed to repeat them for an eternity, Mr Sturgess. What point is there in

history, in your memory, if you don't use it wisely?'

Sturgess ran a hand through his greying hair. 'Look, I'm sure you make a

splendid after-dinner speaker or bar-stool philosopher. .'

The Doctor resumed his tale, ignoring the ill-disguised contempt in Morgan's

words and chewing thoughtfully.

'The result of their short-sightedness wasn't as unforeseeable, however.

Bankruptcy.. ' He swallowed. 'No more Jelly Babies.'

There was a moment of silence, an ideological stand-off.

Suddenly, the little stranger hoisted up his oddly shaped umbrella, swinging

it around him. In the airy expanse of Morgan's office, it found no obstacle in its

path. He might as well have been a blind man in a football stadium.

'Imagine all this, gone for no other reason than to save on cochineal...'

'Nonsense!' Morgan snapped, incensed.

The umbrella stopped, pointing directly at Sturgess.

The Doctor's voice was barely a whisper when he replied.

'That's precisely what they thought.'

Morgan had had enough of the stranger's impertinence, practically choking

on the jellied sweet as he blustered, 'I haven't the time, patience or inclination for

your stories, particularly ones as circumspect as —'

'I am just demonstrating,' the Doctor interjected, letting the umbrella drop to

his side, 'how surprising it is that even the smallest change could affect the fate

of the largest group of people. One wrong decision and you're history. And

history is a nice place to visit, but you wouldn't want to live there, Mr Sturgess.'

He offered the bag once more.

'Another? No? Good man. Rots the teeth...'

Morgan gave a faint sneer as he watched the intruder pocket the bag.

'I suppose you're now going to lecture me about all the dentists who blew

their brains out because confectionary sales plummeted?'

'Actually, I wasn't,' the Doctor replied, deflecting the withering sarcasm with

his own. 'But well done. Your brain is starting to work.' He picked at his teeth

absently. 'I really should have stayed off the things. But then we each have our

own little vices, don't we? Power, glory, riches... the occasional sweet.'

Morgan stepped towards the stranger, his face the colour of the sweet that

had brought down a conglomerate. 'What are you insinuating?'

'I don't believe I was insinuating anything,' replied the little man, a hint of

mischief in his voice.

Morgan grew defensive. The Doctor was toying with him, like a cat with a

mouse. This infuriated him: the man was stood here, in his office, treating him as

an object of amusement.

'For your information, the work invested in the Utopia project was nothing to

do with power or fame. The research was — and has always been — intended to

benefit mankind.'

'And supposing I asked you to stop — to benefit mankind — would you?'

The Doctor's eyes bored into Morgan's; eyes that having seen so much had

grown weary of finding the same petty motives behind those of others.

‘You’re in a minefield, Mr Sturgess. What do you do?’

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‘I’ve no time for riddles, man. Will you please just go back to whatever hole

you crawled out from —’

‘You do *nothing*, Mr Sturgess. That’s what you do. When you can’t be sure of

the implications of your very next step, that’s precisely what you do.’

Morgan found he could not break the stranger’s gaze. Such a little man. Such

an absurd little man. And yet...

‘Destroy the Utopia project,’ the Doctor growled, his lip curling with a fury

he would no longer conceal.

Morgan easily matched the fury, shaking with emotion, his hands flexing as if

he meant to strangle those blasphemous words from the stranger’s neck.

‘You’re crazy!’ he spat. ‘You’re a madman!’

The Doctor ignored him. Instead, he busied himself with searching his

pockets.

‘Ah-ha!’ he exclaimed suddenly, removing his hand. In it, he held a small,

silver- effect cylinder. It looked no more or less than a cigar container to Sturgess.

‘I obtained this from a friend,’ the Doctor explained, staring at it as he held it up

in his hands, as if remembering some long-forgotten detail.

Morgan blanched, fearing that this lunatic was perhaps some self-appointed

assassin. After all, wasn't there as much of the Utopia project in his own head as

there was standing about them?

What...?' he stammered, his rage suddenly quenched by the ice of dread.

'What is it?'

The Doctor glanced at him cheerfully.

'This?'

He held it up, letting the harsh neon light glint on its smooth, burnished

surface.

'This is *your* pink Jelly Baby...'

He twirled it playfully.

'It's not a powerful charge,' he continued matter-of-factly, 'but combined

with the equipment and materials in here, it should be sufficient.'

'How dare you! How *dare* you come in here with your insane ramblings,

expecting me to just stand here and watch you destroy fifty years' work. .'

The Doctor looked at him, a terrible determination in his expression, but far

less terrible than the sombre pronouncement he was about to make.

'I'm not going to destroy anything, Mr Sturgess. You are...'

Morgan almost choked on his own laughter. 'You're insane!'

'Yes... you'd be surprised how often I hear that,' lamented the Doctor,

and he

placed the cylinder down on Morgan's desk.

'I sincerely doubt that,' jibed Morgan in return. He watched the bothersome

little man as he retreated away from him and began to pace around the expanse

of the office. If this was the best the anti-genetic protesters could come up with,

then it was a joke.

The Doctor approached a shelf in the furthermost corner of the office where

various photographs were on display. He set down the folder for a moment and

picked one of them up, an old sepia illustration in a battered frame. It contained

an old, frail-looking subject.

'I'm afraid that smashing my personal possessions will not persuade me to

take your threats any more seriously, Doctor.'

'Mr Sturgess,' replied the Doctor sedately, never taking his gaze away from

the photograph. 'If you knew me, you would know that I abhor violence and

seldom turn into a petulant child in order to make a point.' His brows furrowed.

'A relative?' he enquired, referring to the old man in the picture.

'My grandfather.' Morgan relaxed slightly. He found himself warming to the

Doctor. Despite his earlier demeanour, at his age he seemed quite harmless. He

was no more of a threat to Morgan than Morgan himself would have been to a

twenty-year-old.

The Doctor continued to stare at the picture, noticing a tattoo on the arm of

the old man. ‘A survivor...’ There was a look of immense sadness in his face. He

looked incredibly feeble himself. Morgan almost felt sorry for him.

Morgan nodded sagely. ‘It was taken just before his death. He died on New

Year’s Eve when I was very young. Everyone was singing...’ Morgan became

glassy eyed. ‘My father began to cry.’ His voice trailed off as he stared into the

distance, lost in the past for a moment. ‘It was the only time I ever saw him

upset. He was hollow afterwards. Empty.’

The Doctor continued to look at the picture, at the weathered and broken face

of the man within. Morgan continued, unsure exactly why he was telling the

stranger this.

‘I had always respected my father, but to see him so destroyed by a memory...

at first I was embarrassed — ashamed that such a strong man could turn so

easily into a wreck. But, as I got older... I understood. Understood what had

happened. They were evil. Pure evil... I often wonder why someone hadn't seen

what was coming. Why didn't they stop it, before things got out of hand?'

The Doctor turned his attention from the photograph to Morgan, his eyes lost

in sadness.

'Who's to say *why* they didn't, Mr Sturgess? When faced with a choice, who's

to say they never believed that something so heinous could happen? Evil is a

matter of perspective. The Swastika *was* originally a symbol of peace.. It's still

used by Buddhists to this day.'

Morgan barely registered the Doctor's statement. Instead he continued to

stare into space. 'But surely someone could have acted.' It was as if the little man

before him could provide the answers to the questions Morgan had asked

himself all his life.

The Doctor's voice was solemn. He looked back at the picture in his hands. 'If

only...' He stood for a moment, staring, and then returned the image back to the

shelf. Picking up the folder, he turned away from the photographs and

continued, his tone once again gaining strength. 'But hindsight is a terrible thing,

don't you agree? Like the Jelly Baby, all we can do is learn from those mistakes.

Prevent them being replayed.'

'And that's what you're here to do, is it? Prevent me from making some

terrible mistake?' Morgan was suddenly awoken from his melancholy by the

Doctor's statement — it was just another ploy to achieve his aims. Morgan was

livid; the arrogance in his tone was obvious. 'I must warn you, Doctor, that I

respond just as negatively to guilt as I do to threats.'

The Doctor paced determinedly over to the window, taking in the view

outside. The rain had subsided momentarily, allowing the brief glare of sunlight

through the clouds to illuminate the city outside. 'Mr Sturgess,' he finally began,

and again Morgan picked up the trace of aggression that was there before, 'I

neither think you naive nor stupid. Kindly do me the favour of treating me in the

same manner.'

Morgan looked away, belittled by the Doctor's comment.

The Doctor stared, regarding the cityscape outside with disdain. 'So dull,' he

whispered softly. 'No colours or shapes. Is that what you're striving to achieve?

Everything in its correct place... Like the view?' He gestured outside. 'A soulless,

grey progression towards the horizon. The march of humanity ever onwards,

with a fixed face and a fixed tear in the eye as a testament to what was lost? It's

not a pleasant sight, Mr Sturgess. Believe me when I say that.'

'I'm extending life expectancy, Doctor — not creating monsters.'

'Monsters are where you least expect them, Mr Sturgess.'

'Maybe you should have told Dr Smith this at the Koshland Symposium

during his speech all those years ago. You would have obviously spared me and

countless others from the waste our work and research has obviously been.' It

was a glib comment, designed to thrust at the little man.

If the Doctor noticed the riposte, he ignored it. 'Who?' he asked, turning to

face Morgan.

'Dr Smith,' Morgan replied, recalling the middle-aged man with white hair.

'He was —'

'When was this?' the Doctor asked, a look of confusion wrought into his face.

'The Aludium institute. The late nineties. Why—'

The Doctor suddenly looked unsteady on his feet, visibly shaking. He opened

his mouth as if to say something but nothing came. In that instant, Morgan saw

the shadow of something terrible flash across the man's face. He looked in pain.

As if the weight of the world were on his shoulders, he outstretched his arm,

attempting to steady himself on the handle of the umbrella.

Morgan took a step forward, concerned, but the Doctor held up his hand to

keep him at bay. Instead the little man sighed, taking in a long slow breath and

regaining his composure, drawing himself up once more, his gaze fixed upon the

obstructed skyline beyond the glass. For what seemed like aeons they both stood

there in silence, Morgan unsure as to what had just transpired; debating whether

he should push the issue. As if sensing Morgan's uncertainty, the Doctor spoke

once more, his voice low.

'Immortality is a vastly overrated concept, Mr Sturgess,' he said, his face

silhouetted from the sunlight outside. 'With it comes stagnation.. Imagine a

world with no change, without even the *prospect* of change. A world where your

whole life is planned out from beginning to end from the day you were born. No

respite, no escape. Do you really think that would benefit mankind? Some of

your religions would consider that a form of purgatory.' He looked down for a

moment and, when he spoke again, Morgan caught a hint of defiance in the old

man's voice. 'I know I would.'

‘It wouldn’t be that way!’ exclaimed Morgan, aware despite all his earlier

bravado that he was now pleading his case. ‘You talk as if I’m leading humanity

into a dead end! Can’t you see what this would mean to this planet? No more

disease, no more death. That’s what my work will have achieved!’

‘Mr Sturgess. .’ said the Doctor. He waited until he had Morgan’s full

attention before he delivered the next line. When he did so he looked him

squarely in the eyes. ‘Do you honestly think that’s what your research would be

used for?’

Morgan was speechless. Stunned at what the Doctor was implying.

‘As admirable as your reasons for your research have been, trusting it blindly

to your government — any government — could be considered by some to be a

tremendous risk. Do you think that they would have the responsibility to use

your research for merely altruistic reasons?’

‘What do you mean?

‘What “I mean”, Mr Sturgess...’ He stepped forward towards Morgan. ‘You

have war; you have starvation. You have tribes and sects and Group A and

Group B, still — after thousands of years — clamouring for a foothold on what is

— when all is said and done — a small rock in space.' His voice rose in pitch, the

'R's in his speech rolling; flecks of spittle shooting out at each plosive, each step

towards Morgan another indictment — another condemnation. 'They lie and

cheat and they steal. They enforce their will upon the most unfortunate group

that takes the time to listen. There is hatred and xenophobia on a massive scale

and, given the slightest provocation, half of the world's population would

eagerly rid the planet of the other half. If not for physical differences, then for

greed. Is this the kind of world you want your "baby" project to be unleashed

upon?'

Morgan began to turn away dismissively, but the Doctor grabbed his arm,

forcing him to listen.

'Imagine what your grandfather went through. The image that so scarred

your father: the hunting down and persecution of millions — the systematic

destruction of an entire race of people. How much easier would that have been if

the aggressor never even had to lift a finger to achieve the same results?'

Morgan cast a sharp glance at the Doctor, suddenly realising where the

conversation was heading. 'Get out,' he whispered.

‘Imagine if the Serbians had the same solution.’

‘Get out!’ Morgan’s anger was rising. He reached out and felt his fingers

brushing the crystal turtle that lay on his desk.

‘Or the Hutu militia.’

‘I said *get out*!’ He was shouting now.

‘What would the Red Covenant have done five years ago had they possessed

the fruits of your research when they flooded into South Korea, Mr Sturgess?

How much worse could the devastation have been then?’

Morgan gritted his teeth now, the view of the little annoying man before him

enveloped in a haze of red. His outstretched hand clasped the crystal turtle.

‘For that matter, how would any governmental body, already adept after

several hundred years of lies, several hundred years of cover ups, of

misinformation, of wars started on a deception, of disregard for their own

subjects and a hatred of everyone else’s, continue their vigilance over a society

ever changing?’

He leaned towards Morgan conspiratorially.

‘They would take away that change… How better to keep a society in check,

to keep a society pure, than to make everyone equal in quite a literal

sense. Of

course, there would be no disease of any kind, but there would be no need for

any... undesirable elements either, Mr Sturgess, no need for anyone... different. Is

that what you want to witness, Mr Sturgess? A new —'

'Don't say it,' warned Morgan, hatred just under the surface. He knew what

was coming before the words had even passed the Doctor's lips.

'Final Solution?'

'GET OUT!' Morgan lifted the paperweight up over his head, ready to bring it

down upon the man before him.

The Doctor slammed down the manila envelope, spilling the contents across

the desk, covering the governmental paperwork beneath.

Morgan stared — jaw agape — in horror, the images on the photographs

hitting him with a combination of revulsion and fascination. He teetered for a

moment — taken off guard at the sight — and slumped down into the chair

behind him.

The paperweight dropped to the floor and smashed. It went unnoticed.

'That's how I know...' whispered the Doctor, standing over Morgan, poker-

faced as he stared down at him. 'Because I've seen it, Mr Sturgess.. I've seen it

first hand.'

Morgan struggled to cope with the scenes before him. ‘It’s a lie!’ he shouted.

The Doctor’s voice remained softly spoken, but steady as a rock. ‘I wish it

were, Mr Sturgess. I honestly do. It begins small. But then again, that’s how it

always begins, isn’t it: small. A family pet getting too long in the tooth? Have it

replaced with an exact copy. Eye problems? Implant new ones, ones that see

forever. It’s only a short jump from there —’ he gestured to the pictures ‘— to

here... implementation of breeding farms designed to keep the stock pure...

Untainted... Holding camps for undesirables. .’ He held Morgan’s gaze. ‘Just like

last time...’

He paused for a moment to let that last sentence sink in.

He began to pace slowly around the desk, encircling Morgan as he continued.

Morgan found the movement reminiscent of a vulture, as if at any point the little

man could finish him off and pick over the pieces without batting an eyelid —

this little man who had seemed so non-threatening. He was helpless before him

in his incomprehension at what was happening — frozen with his fear as he

listened, nothing more than carrion.

‘The human race has a great destiny, Mr Sturgess. But that won’t be achieved

by playing around with life as a child would with plasticine.'

There was a crunching as the Doctor stepped on to the remains of the turtle.

Regarding the object beneath his feet, he brushed the shards absent-mindedly

with an outstretched toe as he spoke, curving a small arc in the powdery crystal

— it was an almost childlike motion.

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'Mankind's great advantage,' he continued, 'is its capacity for change. You

adapt, as a species. It's what helped you crawl out of the oceans all those millions

of years ago when the other species on this planet foundered. Just imagine what

that predilection for change could achieve in the next million years. Just think

where you could be. Masters of space.. time. Are you ready to say goodbye to

that possibility because of pride, Mr Sturgess? I'm not sure I am...'

Morgan was struggling to hold a grip on reality. 'But... but what if I don't

sign the papers? If I don't hand them the research this wouldn't happen! I could

refuse, make my research private.'

The Doctor passed behind him, his words finding their way into Morgan's

head as he walked. 'Do you honestly think that after years of funding — of

pulling the strings — they would let a small matter like that get in the way of

things? Do you think they would allow you to take it back? This comes down to

power in the end, Mr Sturgess. What would they do to achieve that power?' He

reached the front of the desk once more and stopped directly in front of Morgan,

leaned in towards him. 'Think about it... Think back to Dennerman. Don't you

find it curious that with all the resources at the disposal of the governmental

enquiry, he was never found?'

Morgan's throat became dry as the full realisation of what the Doctor had just

said sank in.

The Doctor sat down in the chair opposite Morgan, his voice heavy with the

gravity of his words. 'They own you, Mr Sturgess. I'm sorry. I know it isn't easy

to hear, but it's the truth. Rest assured — one day, someone will pick up where

you left off. But it won't be through the funding of a decrepit system of

government looking out for their own agenda.'

Morgan was now fighting to breathe; his head was swimming.

The Doctor continued, seeing the strain in Morgan's face. 'One day, humanity

will see an end to the limits placed upon it.'

Then he stared him straight in the eye. 'But not today, Mr Sturgess.

Not

today.' Morgan sat deathly still: a broken man, destroyed.

The Doctor watched him for several moments, letting the conversation rest,

then eased himself up slowly on the handle of his umbrella, turned, and began to

walk towards the door, the tap of his footsteps echoing in the large chamber as

he strode slowly away. Morgan remained at the desk, his eyes transfixed on the

documents before him. He was speechless, praying for an answer that would not

come.

He looked up, frantic desperation in his eyes, hardly able to speak as the bile

in his stomach rose — only now realising that the Doctor was about to leave.

'Tell me,' he pleaded, 'how do I stop this, what do I do?'

As he reached the door, the Doctor turned and regarded Morgan with an

expression of pity. 'That isn't my decision to make, Mr Sturgess,' he replied

softly as he pressed the release button. The door opened without incident.

'But... but this isn't possible. How can I change this?' Morgan cried. 'It's not

real. It hasn't happened. I can't change something that hasn't happened!'

The Doctor remained in the doorway, brooding — his silhouette conveying

the presence of someone much larger than his simple size gave him credit for. He

took in a short breath, and when he spoke, although almost thirty feet away,

Morgan heard him as clearly as though he were stood next to him. ‘We do what

we feel we have to,’ he said simply. ‘You have a choice, Mr Sturgess. Right here

and now you have a choice. . That is more than a great many people get.’ Then

he turned and was gone, the door sliding back into place behind him.

For several minutes, Morgan sat motionless, continuing to stare at the door,

afraid to move, wishing the Doctor would return. He didn’t. His stomach

churning with dread, Morgan steeled himself to look at the papers spread out on

his desk once more. They stared back, filling him with images of horrors

perpetrated in his name that he had never even thought possible until today.

He looked at the clock. The red numbers stared back, counting by the

moments; taunting him. It was only 7.15. Only 14 minutes since the Doctor had

walked into his office. Fourteen minutes since his life had changed suddenly,

irrevocably.

The intercom chimed, shocking him back to reality. Élan’s voice crackled over

the speaker. ‘Mr Sturgess, the ministry has just called. They were asking if they

could reschedule the meeting... Apparently they want to take possession as soon

as possible.’

He didn’t answer, instead staring at the intercom in terror.

It chimed again. ‘Mr Sturgess?’

He didn’t respond, a cold feeling of dread overtaking him. A thousand

thoughts swirled in his head as he struggled to put some meaning to what had

just transpired.

It was as the clock moved over to 7.16 that he saw it. His eyes darted towards

the small silver canister perched on the edge of his desk...

The explosion — when it hit— was later reported to be heard up to almost

two miles away. Emergency services rushed to the scene and all weather filters

were moved away from the local area and deactivated for a period of 36 hours in

order to prevent damage from the smoke as it swirled upwards from the remains

of the seventy-eighth floor in a large black column and away into the morning

sky. The irony was that this had been the first day in several months the filters

hadn’t been necessary, the morning’s usual precipitation making way for an

otherwise clear summer’s day.

At least 16 people in total were reported injured at the scene with only one

fatality: the entrepreneur and founder of GENECORP, Morgan Sturgess. As the

media descended upon the remains of the GENECORP building, several of them

noted that it had been a miracle that more people had not been hurt in the blast.

Cordons were immediately and efficiently set up in order to prevent any

more intrepid members of the public from approaching the smouldering lumps

of wreckage that had recently impacted into the ground, while several passers-by

and witnesses were interviewed at the scene who all reported that nothing out of

the ordinary had been witnessed that morning. No one seemed to notice the

small, crumpled, strangely dressed figure of a man walk right past the cameras

and interviewees, away and down into the dull grey mezzanine, and into the

general populace...

The Wickerwork Man

Paul Magrs

An Adventure of the Eighth Doctor

That summer, Dad retired from teaching after forty years. Mum and I gritted

our teeth and braced ourselves. We knew he would take it hard. We knew there

would be terrible repercussions for his enforced captivity and inactivity. He had

devoted himself to teaching, all those years, all that effort, and now they were

sending him home for ever.

It was poor Mum I felt sorry for. She'd never see the back of him. This was

the end of her fun, I was sure.

Dad finished up his last week before the summer holidays with a certain

amount of dignity. Only in his very last lesson did he allow himself to rail at the

nasty- natured, shiftless Year Tens who'd blighted his final year in the

profession: 'You lot don't know you're born! You'll never be anything! You'll

never have to work or try to accomplish anything! You simply don't want to!'

And all they did was laugh in his face and watch him limp out of that place with

his wooden stick. Poor old fool.

I'm Peter, the son. I live at home with my parents. Even at the age of 22. I

suppose I'm as shiftless and idle as all the kids my dad's been ranting and

moaning about, these final years of his illustrious teaching career. He brought me

up to be as useless as they are. Oh, well. I'm full of allergies, that's what it is. I've

got all the paperwork to prove it. Actually, summer is a nightmare for me, what

with midges and pollen and what have you.

Dad himself has always been busy busy busy. He can't stop himself. So, when

he retired, and the staff had presented him with a few engraved knick-knacks

and an oversized farewell card, he flung himself into all the house improvements

and manly household tasks he had been carefully saving up.

Shelves went up. Little rails and hangers in the bathroom. And he was

forever out in the garden, hacking and chopping and getting himself all in a

sweat over his compost.

The cellar became sacrosanct: all the glass jars filled with pins and screws and

bolts and hooks, everything labelled fastidiously. From down there we could

hear sawing and banging and all sorts, all night long. All of it was methodical,

patient, neat. Dad is the very opposite of me and Mum, who both tend to be

slipshod.

'I think that's what's put you off doing anything much careerwise, Peter,'

Mum laments. 'Your dad being such a perfectionist. Such a professional.'

'You're right,' I sigh. 'What chance do I stand? It's so demoralising.'

This is us, chatting like this, complicit as we steal away from the house and

into Mum's Octavia, and head across the city to the Trafford Centre. While Dad's

labouring away in the cellar, we thought we'd have a shufti round Selfridges and

John Lewis. This time of year might mean end of term and no more school to

teachers — but to Mum and me it means summer sales and bargains galore.

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That was the night we saw the table and chairs.

Our family had never gone in for outdoor dining before.

The same thought entered both Mum's and my heads at the same time. An

idea of gracious living. A large parasol to shield us from the blazing July sun, as

we sipped chilled white wine and nibbled on a niçoise salad. We'd recline and

read our magazines and chunky summery novels. We'd laze about on these

wonderful wickerwork chairs at our new and swishy wickerwork table.

It was marvellously reduced in price, and it was the very last set in stock.

Mum and I — habitués of sales seasons — knew that it would go in a flash to

someone. We had to strike now. She jabbed the buttons on her mobile, but could

she raise Dad? No, he'd still be down in that cellar, sleeves rolled up,

hammering

away or somesuch. Mum gnawed her thumbnail and I heard it crack. I winced.

‘Let’s just buy it,’ she said decisively. She fished out all of her credit cards and

was immediately set upon by sales people. When could they deliver? Could she

get a further reduction? What colours did the parasol come in?

I stood watching, beaming. Mum was never happier than when there was a

big transaction going on; a large new purchase in the offing. It was while I was

standing there, in the middle of that gleaming, gorgeous, cathedral of a shop that

I noticed the Doctor. And he had noticed our table and chairs.

While Mum was sitting at a desk, signing all the papers, jabbing in her PIN

number and undergoing the whole ritual of conspicuous consumption, the

Doctor was running his hand along our table. He was examining it from all

angles like a garden-furniture expert. He straightened up at last. ‘Hmm,’ he said,

fixing me with a stare.

I stared right back. This was our table and chairs now. He needn’t think he

was nipping in.

He had very clear, sharp grey eyes. His face was angular, pensive, rather

handsome. I flinched at that first exchange of hard stares, I must

admit. He had

all this glossy, wavy dark hair and he was dressed — I still don't know why — a

bit Mr Darcyish or something. With a cravat hanging down and a long velvet

coat. There was something about him that stopped you wondering why he

looked so odd, or where he came from or what he was doing. The Doctor just

was, somehow.

He wandered over to me and tapped his nose knowingly. 'Are you having a

barbecue, then?'

I nodded and I couldn't quite get my words out. Not like me. I felt a fool,

standing there in calf-length shorts and a stripey T-shirt. I felt like I was the one

dressed strangely. The Doctor's breath smelled like he'd been eating sweets.

'That's the idea,' I said. 'You're not after it too, are you? It's the last in stock,

this table and chairs, and Mum really wants it for my dad. He's just retired and

she doesn't think he's got long to live and...' I was about to go into this whole sob

story, hoping that the Doctor would be the type to be taken in by it. Instead he

put a finger to his lips.

'What's your name?'

I told him. He nodded again.

‘I don’t want the table and chairs, no,’ he said. ‘I was just checking it.’

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‘What for? Woodworm?’

‘Unusual vibrations,’ he said, frowning, and reaching a hand out to the table

again. ‘Sentience.’

‘What?’ I started laughing.

Suddenly he said, ‘Invite me to your barbecue.’

‘What?’ I was starting to sound like an idiot.

‘I mean it,’ he gabbled. ‘Invite me right now, and I’ll come. Seriously. This is a

once in a lifetime chance. I’ll come round and — oh. But not shrimp. Don’t do

shrimp, I won’t come then. Other than that I’m not faddy at all.’

Out of the corner of my eye I saw that Mum had finished up at the sales desk.

She looked flushed with triumph and pleasure. Her blush clashed with the

orange of her trouser suit. She frowned when she saw me talking with a strange

man. Then she started titivating her hair and marched towards us.

‘You don’t know where we live. .’ I said.

‘Yes, I do, Peter. Well, I’ll find my way there. So — am I invited? Saturday

early evening, hmm? Okay. I magnanimously accept. Bye, then.’

And he darted off, in the direction of the electronic appliances department,

much to Mum’s annoyance. ‘Who was your friend?’ she asked, giving

me a

funny look, like I go talking to strange men in shops all the time. Like she can

talk!

We thought that Dad would kick up more of a fuss about our extravagance.

It's the usual way. Something Mum's bought, or something I've chosen, or some

folie à deux we've dragged back from the shopping centre. Usually he's stood

there, berating us, telling us neither of us brings in a living wage, and we're

sucking the lifeblood out of him. We're selfish, silly, greedy people.

So at first we didn't say a thing about the wickerwork table and chairs.

'You're very subdued this evening,' he said, as we struggled with the

macaroni cheese Mum had flung together out of what was left in the cupboards.

'Didn't you buy anything nice at the shops? That's not like you.'

'Nice, he says!' laughed Mum.

It was in the middle of the following morning that the van pulled up in our

cul-de-sac. Dad was pruning the hedges at the front, making everything

symmetrical and precise. I heard him shouting out, 'I'm afraid your instructions

must be wrong, then. We *haven't* ordered. .'

And I heard Mum's mules slapping on the path as she ran out to explain. 'Oh,

erm, we have, actually, darling. .' She only ever called Dad 'darling' in front of

delivery men.

I crawled out from under my duvet and peered out of my window to see.

There were the table and chairs, swathed in packaging, being offloaded from the

back of the van. I saw Dad sling down his hedge trimmer in a fit of pique. I was

confident that Mum would soon talk him round. She would have to. We needed

him to work the barbecue. Neither of us could do it.

She would tell him: gracious living. Alfresco. Like being on the continent in

your own back yard. She would sell the whole concept to him, I was sure.

* * *

By the time I was up and about and I'd settled on the day's ensemble, the

delivery had been made, chits had been signed and the van had gone. The table

and chairs were unpacked and set up on the back patio. The parasol was up and

Mum and Dad were standing looking at it, waiting for me to come out and give

my verdict.

It was everything we had hoped for. It transformed everything around it.

‘Do you like it?’ Mum hesitantly asked Dad.

‘It’s all right, I suppose.’

She winked at me. Now she had to get him down the shops to buy a barbecue

and about a ton of frozen food and lashings of booze. That was the next thing.

‘I don’t know how you two twist me round your little fingers,’ Dad said,

shaking his head. They were getting into the car. ‘You two are spoiled, that’s

what it is.’

Mum laughed. ‘Just think how lovely it will be. All our friends and family

round on Saturday. All admiring our new things. It’ll be like a proper retirement

party for you. Much better than that pathetic send-off you had at work.’

Dad looked rueful. ‘That’s true.’ And, as he got into the driver’s seat, I just

knew that he was picturing himself in a chefs hat and pinny, tongs at the ready:

master of the griddle.

I went out that night and, by the time I came home on the last train, I saw that

Mum and Dad were still out in our garden. They had bought paper lanterns and

blazing wax tapers. They were sitting at our garden table with tall glasses of gin.

‘Look at you two, sitting out in the dark!’

‘Oh, it’s lovely, pet,’ Mum sighed. ‘Look, even your dad’s relaxed.’

He hoisted himself up in his wickerwork chair. It was true, usually he would

be down in his basement doing his DIY stuff. How had Mum got him to unwind

so much?

‘Rather comfy, this,’ he said.

It was a balmy evening. No breeze, no chill in the air. The dark garden was

fragrant and the air was soft.

‘There’s a police box by the railway station,’ I said.

They looked at me.

‘It hasn’t always been there, has it?’ I asked. But I’ve lived here all my life.

I’ve been catching trains into the city from Levenshulme station since I was a

toddler. I’d never seen that tall, battered box before.

‘Some new community policing thing, maybe,’ Dad said. ‘Putting bobbies

back on the beat.’

Mum didn’t look convinced. ‘Are you sure it wasn’t a public convenience?’ I

tutted and went in to fetch myself a drink.

Funny thing about that night. Much, much later I went to bed. Mum and Dad

had already gone. I thought — or maybe imagined — that they were making

eyes at each other. Which is pretty disgusting at their age, frankly, but good luck

to them anyway. I sat out there smoking a couple of ciggies, enjoying

the night.

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A breeze struck up, round about midnight. A delicious, balmy breeze, that

seemed to come from a long way away. A breeze that brought a hint of foreign

places. Exotica. The beech trees out back shushed and swayed and the noise was

like the ocean. There were a thousand rustlings and whisperings in the night. All

the windows in all the houses were black and suddenly — I don't know where it

came from — I felt a tiny stab of fear. The wickerwork creaked beneath me. A

creak like a slowly closing door. A noise that niggled me and made me stub out

my fag on the decking and hurry indoors.

I slept deeply, with troubled dreams that I couldn't recall later. I woke in the

very early hours. Dawn broke early. The sky was metallic, hard, shiny. I went to

the loo and peered out of the back window on an impulse.

Dad was sitting out there, alone, on one of the wickerwork chairs.

What did he think he was doing? He'd die of cold. Of rheumatic fever. He'd

be sitting there covered in dew. I gave a little rap on the window pane with my

knuckles.

He must have heard. He didn't look up. He sat staring straight ahead.

The

silly old thing was still in his pyjamas. His feet were even bare.

That next day was when I felt like I was going crazy. I walked along to the

high street to pick up a few groceries and when I passed by the station I stopped

and blinked. That tall blue box had gone. I frowned, all the way round Iceland.

By the time I'd picked up a newspaper and some milk and passed the station

once more, there it was again. Bold and blue as you like. I felt like someone was

playing games with me. No one in the bus queue seemed to have noticed

anything untoward, but there was the box again, right outside the Turkish

takeaway. The one that advertises 'doner barms'. I sidled closer to the box and

touched it, briefly, snatching my hand away when I realised that the box was

tingling. It was vibrating, I was sure, as though it was alive.

The bus came along then, and all the queue went shuffling on board the

double-decker to Piccadilly. I'd once seen an old drunk throw a bottle of sherry

at a young student on that bus because she'd been talking too loud. Seriously.

That's what it's like on that bus.

Just then one of the doors of the box creaked open. I jumped and fell back.

Someone was stepping out and I almost fell over in shock, because it was that

fella from Selfridges the other night, the one in the cravat who'd said he was

coming round our house on Saturday.

'Did you knock?' he said, smiling.

'What on earth are you doing in there? Jumping out at people. .' I sounded

reproachful, I know, but my heart was hammering away.

'Where?' He looked confused.

'What is that thing? What's it doing here?'

'Oh, it's you,' he suddenly said, smiling broadly and tossing back all of that

hair. He stepped out of the box and locked the door. 'Remember? We met in that

big department store. Your mother was buying garden furniture.'

'Of course I remember.'

'I'm the Doctor,' he said. 'Tell me, Peter, how are you getting on with that

table and chairs? Nothing unusual about them?'

I shook my head. 'Should there be?'

His face seemed to cloud over suddenly. 'I'm not sure. I've been checking

everyone's gardens within a ten-mile radius. That's a lot of suburban gardens. A

lot of garden furniture.'

'Hmm,' I said.

‘And I don’t think all of them are affected. Just the wickerwork ones.’

‘Right,’ I said.

‘Yours had the most powerful emanations, though.’

‘Did it really?’ It was hard to know what to say in reply to that. It almost

sounded like a compliment.

‘Well,’ he said. ‘I must be getting on. There’s a couple of other things I need to

look into.’ With that, he started marching off under the railway bridge, towards

the Stockport Road.

‘Hang on, you still haven’t explained what you’re on about and why you

hang around in a wooden box. .’

But he was gone. I touched the box again and it was definitely giving off a

slight tingle. Softer, more gentle than static. Hadn’t he said something about the

wickerwork giving off vibrations?

I wondered if he worked for the manufacturer or something.

Mum was hot-tonging her hair in the kitchen, which wasn’t her usual place

for self-grooming. I walked in and there she was, staring out of the window at

the garden. ‘He’s done nothing all day,’ she said in a stage whisper.

I set down the bags of shopping. ‘Who, Dad? Well, he’s retired, isn’t he? If he

wants to enjoy the sun, why shouldn’t he?’

‘But it’s not like him, is it?’ she said. ‘Look at him! Just sitting there at the new

table. He’s hardly moved at all. I took him out a cup of instant coffee and some

Nice biscuits earlier, and he just said thank you. And that was it!’

I understood her at once. Dad hated instant coffee, and Nice biscuits.

'He isn't himself at all,' Mum said gloomily. 'What about all his projects?

What about all the DP/ and woodwork? I'm even missing the sound of

hammering and banging, though I never thought I'd say that.' She gave a sudden

shriek. 'You don't suppose he's having a breakdown, do you? That happens

sometimes, doesn't it? When a retired person finds themselves adrift, without a

role...' Mum looked close to tears as she finished up tonging her hair. just wish

he would talk to me, Peter. Tell me what the problem is. Some men talk to their

wives. He never has. He's always been in a little world of his own.'

I couldn't believe it. I'd not seen Mum so upset in years. She's such a happy,

contented soul usually. Something must be very wrong for her to get herself so

wound up.

I went out to have a word with my dad. Me and him have never been close. I

know I'm probably a mummy's boy. I always have been. When I was a kid, Dad

tried to get me to play football and he'd embarrass me by joining in and running

about with a ball. Or he'd want to talk about cars or sport or something, and I'd

get embarrassed for him. I suppose I froze him out. I made him feel stupid. He's

never known, really, how to carry on with me.

‘Dad?’

He glanced at me. There was a strange look in his eye. His face looked subtly

different somehow. ‘Peter.’ He smiled. I realised he was wearing one of his work

suits. He was sitting at the wickerwork table just like it was his teacher’s desk at

school. His eyes were gazing vacantly at invisible pupils’ desks.

‘I thought you were getting on with the new bookcases today, Dad,’ I said.

‘The ones for the sitting room. You were right in the middle of putting them

together.’ He shrugged. ‘I suppose I was.’

‘It’s not like you, to go off a project halfway through.’

‘Isn’t it?’ He frowned. Then he held up both his hands and looked at their

calluses and lines. ‘I love working with wood, don’t I?’ he said. ‘I’ve always tried

to interest you in it. In all my little projects. You’ve never really been bothered

though, have you, Peter?’

I smiled, shaking my head.

‘Remember that garage I made for you when you were a kiddie? For your

Matchbox cars?’

I did. Though I always hated toy cars, and couldn’t see the attraction in

brrmm ing them along, Dad's toy garage had always been a favourite. A beautiful,

multi-storeyed object with a working lift. I'd imaginatively converted it into a

department store. Its ramps had become catwalks for miniature fashion shows.

'There's something satisfying about working with wood,' Dad said. 'It's still

alive. It responds to your touch. It's just flesh, you see? And it'll do what you

want, given the right touch...' Now he was stroking the creaking wickerwork of

the table and there was an almost feverish light in his eyes.

'I was always so clumsy at making things,' I said.

'Yes,' he said, chuckling. 'You were, weren't you?' Then his voice hardened,

curiously, as he looked at me. 'How will it feel, to leave no impression on this

world? Have you thought about that? What will you feel like, when you realise

that you will contribute nothing useful or beautiful, hmm? Will you be able to

stand that thought, Peter?'

I took a step backwards. It was a horrible thing for him to say. 'What do you

know about it?' I told him. 'How do you know what I'll contribute to the world?'

Dad shrugged. He said, in an amused tone, 'Time runs out. It's always

running out. I can't see you changing your ways much. You'll just drift through.

Shopping, chatting. A small life. A pathetic life. Much like your mother's. Never

mind. What a pity. A shame, really. But never mind.'

I couldn't believe I was hearing this.

These were the thoughts in the mind of the man who fiddled away in our

cellar! Who tapped and banged and hammered away underneath our feet!

Whiling his time away making his silly shelves and whatnot and doing his DIY.

And there he was, feeling so superior all that time. Feeling like what he was

doing was so important— and his own wife and son were useless and futile. So

that was the truth and now it was out. He hated us! He must do, to tell me what

he just had.

Mum must have been right. He was having a breakdown.

* * *

We ended up inviting everyone we knew for Saturday night. And, when the

time came, and our garden was heaving with friends, relations and Dad's ex-

work colleagues, he seemed okay. He seemed back to his old self. He was in his

pinny and working away at the flash-looking barbecue set Mum had talked him

into buying. He'd also bought every kind of barbecue implement you could

imagine too. Dad likes to be well equipped.

Everyone was getting pretty carried away on the drink. We had this huge

bowl of murky-looking punch that everything had been tipped into. I was

standing there with my ladle, making sure everyone had a try. Then, all of a

sudden, the Doctor was standing there, holding out his paper cup and grinning.

This time he was in an open-necked white shirt. I was glad he'd dressed down a

little. I'd have to explain to people who he was, and it would have been even

stranger had he been standing there in fancy dress.

What would my parents think? That I was about to run off with an older

bloke? 'I said I'd come,' he smiled over his drink. Still, he kept sipping it as we

talked. 'I'd like to know what you're up to,' I said quietly, glancing round to see

if anyone was without a drink.

'I just do whatever I'm required to do,' he said. 'Wherever I happen to be.

And right here and now, there's something very important I need to sort out.

Some particular person, or being, who needs to be sent packing.'

'Oh, yes?' I said. When I looked at his steely eyes, there was something about

the Doctor's tone that made me lose the sense of what he was actually saying.

But I knew I would just go along with whatever he told me. Funny, that. Usually

I'm more headstrong.

Mum was standing there, all of a sudden. She'd brought a plate of corn on the

cob, all sizzling and smelling delicious. She was looking pretty hot too, was my

mum. She'd been and treated herself to a catsuit affair and her hair was

spectacular. She held the corncobs under the Doctor's nose and beamed at him.

'Weren't you the one in the shop the other evening?' she purred.

'Hmm?' he said, distracted. 'Yes, um. When you bought your... garden table

and chairs. How are they working out, by the way? No problems?'

'What?' She blinked. She didn't know how to take him. Mum was doing some

pretty heavy-duty flirting, but it wasn't having the desired effect at all. I hung

back, embarrassed for both of them. 'Are you an expert in garden furniture,

Mr...?'

'Doctor, actually,' he said. 'And this is just a passing interest of mine. It's a

particular set of garden furniture I'm interested in. A set that is made from a

particular type of bamboo. From China.'

'Oh, yes?' she said. 'I think ours is synthetic, isn't it, Peter?'

I shrugged. How should I know?

‘I assure you,’ said the Doctor, suddenly very serious, ‘that your table and

chair set is built from real wood. Ancient wood. Far more ancient than anyone —

even its manufacturer — suspected.’

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‘How interesting,’ Mum said, taking his empty cup and passing it, with hers,

to me for refilling. She wasn’t about to give up her flirting just yet. ‘So you think

it’s more valuable than we knew, eh? If it’s an ancient antique and all.’

‘Valuable?’ He frowned heavily. ‘I don’t care about that. And neither should

you.’ He took the second cup of punch and drained it absent-mindedly. ‘What

should concern us is how deadly it is.’

‘Deadly?’ Mum looked as if she was about to laugh in his face. ‘Our patio

furniture is deadly?’

‘If I’m right,’ he said, ‘then it’s extremely deadly.’

We looked across the patio, through the crush of casually dressed guests, all

swaying about to the summery music, under the spotlessly blue sky. We stared

at the table near the barbecue set, where it seemed innocuous enough, under its

freight of paper napkins and bowls of colourful salads.

‘Beware Goomba,’ said the Doctor, very quietly, so that we could barely hear

his words.

‘Goomba?’ said Mum, and then she finally did laugh. She shook her head and

patted him on the shoulder, saying to me: ‘Peter, I don’t know where you find

these funny friends of yours. Goomba!’ And off she went, shaking her head. I

saw her heading in Dad’s direction. Dad was waving his new stainless-steel

implements with aplomb, showing off and impressing the ladies clustered

around him. Great gouts of controlled flame were shooting out of the barbecue-

machine thing.

‘Doctor,’ I said, ‘L.’ I turned round, just in time to see him striding away

through the crowd, and out of the garden. Right, I thought. You don’t get away

as easily as that. You don’t come round here and make a few spooky, cryptic

asides, and then sneak out without a sensible word of goodbye. I struggled

through the seething, sweltering party, out the garden gate, and up the alleyway

at the side of our house.

I knew where he was going. He was striding along determinedly, head down,

marching down the winding, leafy streets, back towards Albert Road and the

railway station. He went straight past the bus queue and, sure enough, right up

to the doors of that police box. He unlocked the door, glanced around sharpish

— and that's when he saw me, outside the kebab shop.

'Who's Goomba?' I said.

He rolled his eyes. 'I suppose I'll have to tell you now, won't I?' He nodded at

the door into the box. 'Be my guest.'

'In there?' He nodded, and I darted in.

What it reminded me of in there was when they do up an old bank or

something, and make it into a nice theme pub, like they have in the city centre.

So you've got this large space on several layers, pillars and potted palms and

stained glass. But then you've got comfy seats and mood lighting and all that.

Well, that's what his TARDIS was like inside.

It was a bit of a jumble sale, really, but you could see that he was dead proud

of it, so I said I was impressed by it and everything. I'm used to looking at

people's flats and whatnot and saying the right things about what they've done

with the space. Like, warehouse flats in town and stuff.

Anyway, I made all the right oohing and aahing noises about the deceptive

interior of the Doctor's blue box.

He was over at what I thought was some kind of writing desk in the middle

of the room. I followed him and realised it was covered in control panels, all lit

up and blinking.

'It's quite good, this,' I said. 'And you get all of this inside that little box?'

He looked up from his control-panel thing. 'Hmm,' he said. And that's when

he explained what it was called, and how it could go anywhere in time and

space. 'That's a dizzying prospect,' I said. 'A nice one, though.'

'Well,' he said. 'I promised I'd explain to you what the danger is.' He pressed

a number of switches and twizzled a bunch of dials. Then he told me to look at

the ceiling, where a huge screen was opening up and crackling into life.

'Mum was keen on a plasma screen thing,' I said. 'But the salesboy blinded

her with science.'

'Watch,' the Doctor said.

'What am I looking at?' It was some kind of prehistoric swamp, all glowing

with lurid colour and just about 3D. It was like being at one of those cinemas

where it's all real as life, or so they say. I wouldn't fancy that much.

'This is China,' he said. 'Or what will become China, in several million years'

time.'

'Really?' I said.

'Look at the bamboo,' he told me. I could hardly avoid it. Huge knotty spears

of the stuff, spiking up in every direction. It was hard to get a sense of scale, but

it all looked enormous to me. 'Look at that particular plant.'

'What, the one with the face?'

I'd spoken the words before I'd thought them out. And the plant did indeed

have a face. It was the most malignant and evil-looking face I'd ever seen. Its

glowing red eyes were glaring out at me.

' *That's* Goomba,' the Doctor said. 'At least, that's how he was, back then, all

that time ago.'

'He's awful,' I said.

'He doesn't belong on this Earth.' The Doctor sighed. 'He's a creature who

slipped through from some other dimension. He's a tree god of tremendous

power and wiles. He floated through space, looking for somewhere to plant

himself . and came to Earth in a terrible lightning storm at what you would

probably call the dawn of time. Anyway. He's a nasty piece of work.'

I licked my lips and they tasted bitter, suddenly, from all of that punch I'd

been drinking. 'Where is he now?' I asked, dreading the answer.

The Doctor looked at me very solemnly. ‘If I am right — and I think I am —

Goomba, or what’s left of him, is sitting in the corner of your garden, being used

as a salad bar.’

What did I expect the Doctor to do?

I’m not sure. He had all the answers, didn’t he? And the super, whiz-bang,

outer-space gadgetry, so I suppose I expected him to sweep into action and save

the day, or something. It seemed like the kind of thing he might do. Instead, he

slumped down in a high-backed armchair. He picked up a stack of old Jack Kirby

comics and started sipping at a cup of tea, calm as you like. He didn’t offer me

any tea. I just stood there, dumbfounded at his manners.

‘I’ll be off then, shall I?’

‘Hmm?’ He peered at me over his comic. How was his tea still hot, I

wondered vaguely. ‘Oh, yes, off you go then. If anything untoward happens, let

me know, will you?’ He smiled and nodded absent-mindedly.

God, I once went out with a bloke who read American comics. He was a bit

weird, as well, come to think of it. They start thinking it’s normal, all that

dashing about in silly costumes and battling huge, elemental creatures.

But... the Doctor really did live inside this Gothic, cavernous tomb. It really

was hidden inside a police box. Ergo he really did have weird powers of a

particular sort. And I had walked into something beyond my understanding. It

was all true.

But the Doctor wasn't playing any more. 'Just shut the door after you, would

you?' he called airily, as I headed towards the exit. What had I done or said

wrong, I wondered.

Soon enough, I was back out on sultry Albert Road. The stone was still warm

from the day's heat and the air was choking with petrol fumes and kebabs.

Luckily no one saw me creeping out of the police box and clicking the door

closed.

I stomped home crossly. What had he shown me those strange pictures for,

anyway? Goomba the bamboo monster from the dawn of time? Thrashing about

with his eyes all ablaze; a spirit from another dimension, all voodoo and

splenetic fury.

As I hurried through the darkness towards home, thinking of the back garden

lit with tapers and the friendly noise of our oldest friends and neighbours, I was

starting to doubt what I had seen. The Doctor had hoodwinked me. I was tipsy

on that punch, that's what it was. He'd shown me some clips from some

ridiculous old monster movie — some Ray Harryhausen-type twaddle — and I'd

fallen for it. My jaw had dropped open. That's Goomba! The stone-age bamboo

monster! Of course! Honestly. I must be mental. Or rather, I'm credulous. I'd

listen to anything some good-looking bloke was telling me. I'd fall hook, line and

sinker. That's what Mum would say. She's always saying I'm too soft. I'd be

taken in by anyone. I can't help it if I've got a trusting nature.

As I rounded into our leafy, dark street I realised that our party had

quietened down somewhat. That seemed early, to me. I hurried to our cobbled

side alley, and there I bumped into Dad's young headmaster, Anthony Danby,

and his wife, Melanie. They were slipping out, looking relieved, I thought, as

they headed for freedom. The headmaster was one of the new, young, liberal

breed that Dad disapproved of, but Anthony played football, so Dad said he was

okay.

'Oh,' said Melanie, noticing me. 'We have to get back for the babysitter. Can

you tell your parents we had a lovely time?' She seemed jittery somehow as I

nodded. They hurried away to their car and I was left wondering why couldn't

they tell Mum and Dad themselves?

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I soon had my answer.

I swung open the garden gate and found that all of the guests were busy on

the lawn. They had abandoned the patio and the barbecue and they were

working together, busily, on the dark lawn, lit only by the tall wax tapers. I

recognised a few faces in the concerted hurly-burly: Mrs Evans, Dad's school

secretary, and Mary Mead, our lollipop lady, and Jessica Northspoon from down

the road.

They appeared to be doing DPI. All of them. Spread out on the lawn with all

of Dad's tools and heaps of old wood. Crates and boxes and sticks of old

furniture. Banging and tapping and hammering together. I'd wondered what all

the noise was. Familiar as it was from Dad's DIY den, I hadn't expected a noise

like this, magnified and in the open air. There must have been twenty or so of the

remaining guests, mindlessly splicing together chunks and hunks of wood.

They were building something.

Dad was at the bottom of the garden. He looked feverish and golden in the

guttering light. I could hear him, exhorting them to work faster, faster.

‘Build him! Build him!’ Dad was hissing at our party guests.

I didn’t like the look of this one bit.

I veered away from them, hoping not to be seen, and hurried towards the

back door. I kept well clear of the new dining table and chairs. The patio set sat

there, looking bare and innocuous enough. But now I knew for sure that there

was more to it; that the Doctor had been right. With an almost superstitious

dread, I skirted right past it and into the kitchen.

Mum was drinking a tall glass of gin and chewing on the ends of her hair. She

was watching the lawn activities through the window. ‘Oh!’ she gasped at me.

‘Where have you been?’

‘Never mind that. What’s going on?’

She gave a very fake laugh. ‘It’s your dad’s doing. DP/ gone mad, I suppose!

It’s like one of those make-over programmes. He’s got them all at it, look!’

‘But they’re, like... possessed,’ I said.

Our party guests seemed to be redoubling their efforts, even as we watched.

They were working in concert, in deepest concentration, knocking pieces

together and passing them over for further work, wordlessly, as if they were all

aware of the grander design, the final shape that these unwieldy jigsaw pieces

would eventually take on.

‘What are they making, Mum? What has he got them all doing?’

Mum looked stricken. ‘I don’t know. I think he’s really flipped. You’ve seen

his behaviour recently, Peter.’

‘But why are they just blindly following him? And doing what he tells them?’

‘Your father can have a very commanding manner,’ she said.

‘I don’t like this,’ I said. ‘It feels wrong, somehow.’

‘I took round a tray of nibbles,’ she said dolefully. ‘And no one was

interested. No one even looked. Not even Mr Roberts from Windsor Road. He’s

85 and — look! — he’s working like a demon.’

Now they seemed to be putting pieces together, bang in the middle of the

lawn. They looked like Egyptians toiling to put up the pyramids. Or children

building up a bonfire... piling and piling the wood in a heap; nailing it together

as if for a gimcrack crucifixion...

‘I think we should stop them,’ I said.

‘How?’ Mum said nervously. ‘They won’t listen to us.’

I looked at her. ‘You know what’s causing this, don’t you?’ She shook

her

head and I dragged her to the kitchen door. I pointed at the new table set on the

patio. ‘The Doctor was right. It’s that thing. Whatever was inside it... has got

inside Dad. That’s what’s behind this. Goomba.’

‘Oh, really, Peter.’ Mum rolled her eyes and grasped the Gordon’s gin from

the breakfast bar. ‘This is Levenshulme. We don’t have ancient bamboo voodoo

spirits round here.’

‘I think we should destroy the patio furniture. Before it’s too late.’

She squawked. ‘If you were the one earning the dosh, I doubt you’d be so

keen.’

‘How can you talk about money at a time like this?’ I was having to shout

now, over the noise of our party guests. They had joined in with the rhythmic,

primitive chanting started by my dad: ‘Build him! Build him! Build him higher!

Build him up!’

‘Money!’ cried Mum. ‘That’s all you ever think about, young man. That, and

spending it on designer labels and gadgets and tops and shoes and bags and

everything. I wouldn’t care, but you don’t bring a penny into this house. You

never have!’

‘What?’ What did that have to do with anything? My brain felt fuddled, by a

mixture of confusion and shame. Mum was drunk, Dad was demented and there

was some ghastly ritual going on in our garden. ‘Build him! Build him higher!’

‘I blame myself, Peter,’ Mum slurred, chopping up a lemon savagely on the

bread board and dunking the slices in her tall glass. ‘I’ve encouraged you to be as

greedy and silly as I am. Your dad was right. I’ve turned you. I’ve made you

materialistic and queer and nasty-mouthed.’

‘Good!’ I found myself shouting back. ‘Good! I’m glad!’

‘No, it’s not good, Peter. Look at you! You don’t do anything apart from bitch

and moan and shop for bargains. Now you want to smash up the patio furniture!

Just because your poor old dad is enjoying himself . and you want to spoil his

fun!’

‘Fun!’ I yelled. ‘Mum, that’s not fun he’s having! The poor old bugger is

possessed!’

‘Possessed!’ She laughed, staggering a bit on the new kitchen tiles. ‘Possessed,

he says!’

‘Yes,’ I said, lowering my voice. ‘And I think you are, a little bit, too.’

‘Possessed!’ Mum shrieked, delightedly. ‘I like that! By Goomba, I suppose,

eh? By Goomba the bamboo god!’

And then I looked at the DIY zombies at the bottom of the garden. All the

banging and hullaballoo of construction had abruptly ended. They had

seemingly completed their task.

It was an effigy of something that was not quite a man. It had a recognisable

if rudimentary semi-human shape. Its head was huge and hollow and its thick

arms were upraised, stretching out. There were two black holes for its eyes.

Dad and the others were clustered before it. They were evidently proud of

and pleased by their handiwork.

How had they managed it? How had a ragbag assortment of staid teachers

and local geriatrics managed, in less than an hour or so, to rig up this wooden

monstrosity? The effigy had a weird look to it. Its dark hollow eyes drew you in.

Its clumsy hands seemed to be reaching out for you.

Mum and I stared at it. We forgot about our argument. A chill silence reigned

through the garden.

‘Goomba. .’ Mum hissed then, in a low voice. She shuffled out of the kitchen,

scraping the heels of her stillies.

‘Mum...?’

Woorrrssshhhiiipppp hiiimmmmmm...’ Mum moaned, as she clipped past

me, brushing off my words of protest. She let her gin glass crash and tinkle on

the patio flagstones. The party guests took up her eerie, ecstatic chant.

‘Mum!’ I yelled, as she strode off across the grass to join them.

‘Goooommmbaaa! Goooommbaaa! Wooorrrssshhhiiipp Gooommmba!’

They were all swaying now. The wax tapers guttered and spat tall flames.

Shadows danced and flickered across the hulking wooden brute of an effigy.

I fled. I fled from my own home. It was dark by now and I was scuttling away

through familiar suburban streets, feeling lost and exiled and that I could never

go back. It was a sensation and a predicament I’d imagined occurring to me — as

a result of any number of my misdemeanours — but never had I suspected it

would come about as a result of what this night had seen.

First I hurried round to the station, dodging past a few rough-looking drunk

blokes. Taxis were zipping by, on to the Stockport road — and their orange lights

hoving into view made me realise I had precisely no cash with me.

The police box had gone again. I could have stamped my feet on the

pavement and performed a dance of fury like Rumpelstiltskin. The Doctor had

nicked off again. He was completely unreliable.

I nipped up the steps to the station platform. Surely there'd be the last trains

still running, shunting into Piccadilly. I'd be able to nip on ticketless, find

somewhere in the city to hide out for the night. I was running blind and

panicked, I knew. I'd been shocked out of my senses by the sight of Mum and

Dad and their guests bowing down before that homemade god.

I ran to the end of the platform. From the very end you can see the backs of

our houses. From my bedroom window I've always been able to see and hear the

trains roaring and clanking their way in and out of Manchester. Now I was

perched at the end of the platform, a runaway, staring back at my home.

And there they still were, in the blazing firelight.

From this distance, perhaps it didn't look like anything much out of the

ordinary. A family barbecue with a crowd that wasn't, actually, all that rowdy. A

statue hulking over them, unmoving. Some weird kind of construction; an art

installation, perhaps. A bit of fun.

From here you would never know the strange intensity of what was going on

in our garden. Thank God I hadn't been affected, I thought. Thank God I'd kept

my head, while those about me fell in thrall to Goomba.

I was staring down at our garden when a hand fell heavily on my shoulder. I

just about leapt out of my skin. I swung round at the Doctor, swearing wildly.

'It's all right,' he murmured. 'You should learn to mind your language, you

know.'

I swore again, and kept going till my heart palpitations stopped. There he

was again, in his green velvet and silvery-grey silk waistcoat. He was staring

with great interest across at our back garden, where the worshippers were

swaying and moaning in ragged chorus. His eyes were gleaming.

'I see that Goomba has made his presence felt,' he said, frowning. 'Run away,

did you? Were you hoping to escape into the city?'

'I don't know what I thought,' I admitted. 'I came looking for you, but your

blue box had gone.'

'Yes,' he said. 'Urgent call. I had something else to attend to. You don't think I

undergo these adventures one at a time, do you? Sometimes I juggle a whole

load at once. Just for the fun of it, and just because I can. Well, sort of.'

'What?' I wasn't in the mood to listen to him babbling on.

‘Look at that,’ he said mildly, leaning forward over the metal railing. ‘How

interesting.’

I watched, appalled, as several wooden fences between the gardens sagged

and collapsed heavily on to flower beds. There was a great creaking and

grinding of wood; a splintering and snapping of planks and branches; a rending

and ripping of panels and boards. Near us, the chipboard nailed to the broken

windows of a condemned building was wrenched off with a great crash. ‘Who’s

doing that?’

The Doctor’s eyes were better than mine. He could see that no one was

physically yanking these boards and fences apart. Some terrible disembodied

force was affecting this damage.

I watched as the fragments of wood lifted up and sailed through the dark air,

towards our garden, as if drawn by some peculiar form of magnetism. Even the

tall beech trees and the venerable evergreens had started to stir, their branches

thrashing about in frustration.

‘Goomba is growing,’ the Doctor said. ‘He’s building himself up.’

We could just about make out the sight of the wood attaching itself to the

body that our barbecue guests had fashioned for him. The moments

passed and

he grew larger and more grotesque; his body thick and stolid like the bole of an

ancient tree.

Then we heard his voice. His worshippers shrieked gleefully as he opened his

colossal mouth and roared his name to the south Manchester skies:

‘ *Goooommmbbbaaa!* ’

‘I think it’s time we did something about this,’ said the Doctor, turning

sharply on his heel, and marching quickly down the platform. I hurried to keep

up, and found that he was muttering away, seemingly to himself. ‘Perhaps I’ve

let it go too far. I should have just taken the garden furniture and left. I shouldn’t

have let them get this deep…’

‘What are you saying?’

‘Oh,’ he said. ‘I’m just thinking aloud. I might have made my usual mistake.

You know, got myself so interested in it all, and what might happen and

everything and… um, I might have let things go too far.’

‘What will Goomba do?’ I was panting, keeping up with his pace. We trip-

trapped quickly down the tiled stairways. Very careful not to trip. Those steps

are a nightmare.

‘Oh, Goomba will do what displaced, misplaced evil gods from other

dimensions always do when they get themselves a willing pack of lackeys.’

‘Take over the world?’ I said. ‘Enslave mankind?’

The Doctor stopped in his tracks. ‘You’re very good at this, aren’t you?’ We

started running again, down to the station’s exit. ‘You see, there might be an

ecological angle to this too. Goomba’s been stuck on this world, all during man’s

time on the planet. And he’s a plant, you see. He might be a bit miffed at the way

you lot have — you know — treated your environment and so on. He might be

out for revenge.’

‘I suppose he might,’ I said. ‘Why doesn’t he declare revenge on pandas,

then? They even eat bamboo.’

‘I’m only surmising,’ said the Doctor. ‘Based on long, long experience of

dealing with baddies.’ He fished around in his pockets for his police box keys.

‘Come inside,’ he said, and I hopped in after him, loving the cool and echoing

quiet within, which seemed like a world apart from the fervid voodoo heat of

our back garden.

‘We need to stop his influence spreading outwards,’ continued the Doctor.

‘He’s put down roots, as it were, in the minds of your family and

friends. Now

his influence will spread outwards. Within days you'll have a religious cult of

Goomba operating here. The world's eyes will be drawn to his influence. People

will follow. He'll bring them to him, and he'll make them all do his bidding...'

The Doctor looked up at me and grinned. 'We're going to nip this in the bud.'

He pointed me in the direction of a kitchen alcove, where I would find a

kettle and everything I needed to make two cups of sweet milky tea. It would

calm my nerves, he said, and would I mind bringing his over to the console? He

was finicking with the controls and I gathered that he was going to fly this box of

his over to our garden, rather than take a short walk.

'If I can just get us to materialise *around* the effigy...' he murmured, spinning

tiny dials and concentrating.

Minutes later I brought the tea over. I'd found what must have been the best

china in one of the cupboards. I was just stepping up to the console, the cups and

saucers tinkling in my hands, and saying, 'Are you nearly —', when I tripped,

and fell full length, hard on to the console.

Tea splashed everywhere. The Doctor cried out as a series of small explosions

fired off across the controls. Sparks and steam shot out and sizzled around us,

making me jump back painfully on to my feet. I was scalded and ashamed. Then

the next surprise: the blue glass columns atop the console had started to rise and

fall, making a crashing, grinding, wheezing noise that was rising to a huge

climax. ‘What have I done?’ I said, in a very small voice.

The Doctor’s face was dark with anger. He stood there very still, and then he

sprang into action, poring over the damage I had caused to the instruments.

‘We’re in motion. You’ve pitched us into the vortex.’

Well. I didn’t know what that meant exactly, but it didn’t sound good, did it?

‘I hadn’t finished calibrating the exact figures…’ he said, busily wafting away

smoke from the smouldering circuitry.

‘I’ve always been clumsy,’ I said. ‘I was always hopeless. I’d never have been

able to do the DIY and stuff my dad can do.. I’ve got awful coordination.’

The Doctor shushed me. ‘It might not be so bad. You might have put us only

a little way off course…’ He was squinting up at the read-out on an ancient

television set that was hanging from one of the iron pillars. I couldn’t read what

the scrolling text was telling him, but he seemed satisfied. Sort of.

‘We’re about to...’ The wheezing and groaning of the engines cut off abruptly,

with a deeply felt sigh of exhaustion. ‘Land,’ he added, his voice struggling to

sound more hopeful. ‘Thanks for the tea, Peter,’ he said.

As promised, we hadn’t moved very far at all. We emerged from the box at

the end of our street. It was light. Bright, spangling daylight. ‘When is this?’ I

asked, quietly. I sniffed the air. I don’t know why. What does a Saturday smell

like? Any different to a Wednesday?

The Doctor seemed perturbed by the daylight thing. ‘We might have been

pushed off course... slightly.’

‘Slightly? What does that mean?’

‘I don’t know,’ he snapped. ‘You were the one who went dropping hot tea

everywhere.’

Actually.. this day we had landed in did have its own distinctive smell. A

woody, ashy, acrid scent that came wafting out on the summery breeze.

‘Bonfires. .’ I said.

The Doctor was way ahead of me. He led the way down the street to my

house and, once in the side alley, it was obvious where all the thick, curling grey

smoke was coming from. There was also a crowd of people standing there,

queueing patiently to be let in. They were quite ordinary people, all ages and

types. Just the sort of people you would see on the high street. Each of them had

a piece of old furniture. They were carrying hat stands, foot stools, broken chairs.

One poor old man was carrying a whole door, and looked like he was being

squashed under its weight.

'Uh,' I said, cross that I could hardly push through into my own garden.

'What's this? *Bargain Hunt*?'

The Doctor gave me a dark, worried look. 'Let's hope not. I had a terrible time

at a car boot sale, not too long ago. Awful time, with these haunted knick-knacks

and. .'

'You can explain it all later. What's this lot meant to be doing?'

'Tributes to Goomba, I imagine. His influence has spread. Look at them! They

are utterly entranced! It must be several days later, I imagine. .'

'Days! But...' I looked around wildly. I hurried to the side wall, where there

were footholds, I knew, for climbing over if you lost your key for the gate. I was

desperate to get over. 'But what's happened to my parents?'

The Doctor shoved me, helping me to clamber up. Once I was astride the

crumbling wall, he hopped up effortlessly beside me, which was annoying. No

one in the patient queue took any notice of us. And, by then, we were too caught

up with what we could see in the garden. We had to crane our necks upwards to

take it all in: Goomba had grown until he was almost as tall as the beeches. His

head was swollen now, till it was the size of a summer house. He was a curious

assemblage of furniture and broken wood. I could see what had been our posh

new table and chairs, protruding from his chest and woven into the overall

design. Branches were growing out of him, here and there, and now those two

hollow eyes were glowing a fearsome red, just as they had in the ancient footage

the Doctor had shown me.

'He's reaching his apotheosis,' said the Doctor quietly.

'His what?'

'His. . I mean, he's got very much bigger.'

He was on fire too. That was the weird thing. Why hadn't he been reduced to

ash and smouldering cinders? That whole huge body rested atop a crackling

bonfire, which was sending out those suffocating grey fumes. Transparent flames

licked outwards and upwards, but Goomba simply sat there, basking and

relishing the heat.

‘Look,’ said the Doctor softly. ‘Inside his head.’

I choked. I don’t know why I hadn’t seen at first, but there was a small,

human figure plainly visible inside that hollow head. An oldish man, clinging to

wooden struts, red-faced and streaming with sweat. It was Dad. His head was

hanging down and he looked as if he was nodding off. But then, as we watched,

and the local acolytes on the lawn fanned the flames, and fed them more

household furniture, Dad raised his face to the heavens. The expression on that

face was exultant.

I opened my mouth to shout out, but the Doctor stopped me. ‘That’ll do no

good.’

‘But he’ll die! That thing’s a tinder box. He’s out of his mind, and doesn’t

even realise the danger he’s in…’

‘Too late,’ said the Doctor. He swung both legs over the wall and dropped

lightly on to the flower beds below. I dropped a little less lithely. ‘I mean it,’ he

added. ‘I’m sorry, Peter. But your dad’s a goner. You must see that. He’s

Goomba by now. His mind has been completely taken over by that

hideous,

wretched creature.'

I stared at the flames, and the wooden god rising above it all. 'We can still

save him,' I said. 'The hose! It's got five settings! It's really powerful. We can put

out the flames...'

'That won't bring back your father's mind. He has been absorbed, Peter.'

That wasn't going to stop me trying. I was amazed none of those

brainwashed lackeys had thought to hide the hose, or even bothered to stop me

dashing past them and on to the patio. I hefted the hose nozzle like a gun.

'Right,' I said, and twisted it to full.

The flames hissed and roared in fury. The smoke turned black as the wood

was dampened. A mist of rain was flung everywhere round the garden and I

laughed — I even laughed — as the acolytes howled out in displeasure. I was

raining on their — well, not parade, exactly. Their pagan rites to an alien voodoo

god. That's what I was raining on.

Goomba himself shrieked out loud as the water lashed against his wooden

form and the flames were driven back. His branchlike arms flexed and thrashed;

his clumsy, sinister fingers warded me off.

‘Peter, no!’ the Doctor was yelling. ‘You’ll make it worse!’

‘How can it be worse?’ I shouted back. took! I’m doing something practical,

for once in my life!’

I tried to make out the figure of my father, held trapped inside the head of

Goomba, through all the hissing steam and smoke. Weirdly, there were rainbows

in our garden, and the servants of the voodoo god were stamping and thrashing

about inside those glimmering arches of colour, sliding about in all the mud. I

drove them back with fierce blasts of freezing water.

Then the water pressure gave out. All of a sudden, it just stopped.

I whipped my head round, and there was Mum, standing at the outside tap.

She glared at me. Her eyes were a venemous, unearthly red.

‘You dare to jeopardise the apotheosis of Goomba?’

‘What?’ I’d never seen her like this. ‘Mum? Stop being possessed! Stop being

so weird! You’ve got a mind of your own! Throw off this evil influence!’

‘See?’ cried the Doctor, all hearty and gung ho, interposing himself between

Mum and me. ‘Did you notice that, Peter? Your mother used the “apotheosis”

word. I told you that’s what was happening. I know an apotheosis when I see it.’

‘It is the hour of dread, Goomba’s final becoming on this earth,’ she told him

in a dull lifeless tone.

‘Oh, good,’ said the Doctor, smiling. ‘I’m glad we’ve managed to catch him,

before the off. My ship was knocked off course by a few days or so, and I thought

we might not. So he’s leaving, is he? And how many human beings has he

managed to enslave?’

‘Enough,’ hissed Mum. ‘Enough to take him through to his own world.’

‘Oh, good,’ said the Doctor. ‘And he’ll just burn them all up to a crisp, will

he? Or will he be eating them? And has he informed his new followers of their

imminent fate, hmm? Because that’s not fair, if self-sacrifice is the price of

admission. I think newbies should be informed, myself. Perhaps Goomba should

produce a brochure. Or a mission statement, perhaps. What do you think, Peter?’

I was watching the zombie-like followers picking themselves up. Some were

piling up the wood and attempting to light it once more. Others had opened up

the garden gates to let fresh acolytes in. And the rest were turning their wicked

attentions to us... ‘He’s going to kill them all, isn’t he?’ I said.

The Doctor nodded quickly. ‘Goomba needs sacrifices. He needs their... life

essence, we could call it, to use as fuel. To help him slip through the dimensions,

and return home. And, thanks to our slight delay, he has just about made a

success of it.'

My heart was pounding. 'It's my fault! Mum and Dad have lost their minds,

and everyone's gonna get burned to a crisp... and it's all down to me!'

Mum fixed her blazing, hate-filled eyes on me again then, and suddenly she

seemed to recognise me. But not in a good way.

'You!' she shrieked. 'You are the son! You are the one who escaped from

Goomba! You are the one responsible for bringing Goomba to this place. . to

Levenshulme...'

'Mum, snap out of it,' I shouted. I was very aware that the worshippers had

formed a solid wall around us. There was absolutely no chance of escape. And

now the flames were taking hold again of the massive form of Goomba. Even

soaked, the wood still managed to catch light.

'She can't hear you any more,' said the Doctor softly. 'All of them are the

same. All of them speak with the voice of Goomba now.'

Then, as if in reply, that huge, shattering voice came booming out of the vast

effigy. ‘ *Goooooommmmbaaaaaa!* Goomba will speak with you!’

We were swept along in a tide of zombie neighbours. They were all filthy, as

if they had been out here for days without rest, building this pyre. The Doctor,

Mum and I were caught up in the crush. Only the Doctor and I weren’t wearing

mad, ecstatic expressions at the hideous sound of Goomba’s voice.

‘I am almost ready,’ said the creature, ‘to make my departure from this

world.’ A ragged cheer at this, from his exhausted acolytes, though I gathered his

going wouldn’t bode well for any of them.

‘You have served me well, you human beings from the place known as

Levenshulme. Goomba has waited many thousands of years to be served so well,

and to leave this world far behind. You will be rewarded lavishly for the sacrifice

of your physical beings.’

I heard the Doctor give a polite cough, over the mutterings and sobbing of the

servants of Goomba. ‘Hello? Goomba? Could I have a word?’

The wooden god’s eyes blazed. He was a terrifying sight, it has to be said,

with those hungry flames licking around him, and growing ever higher. I stared

into those scarlet eyes, and I could still pick out the silhouette of my dad,

crouching and cowering inside that hollow head.

‘Who addresses Goomba?’ the creature demanded. ‘Who still has a will

of his

own?'

'Ah,' shouted the Doctor. 'I'm rather afraid that'll be me. Though I'm not sure

why I sound so apologetic about it. I'm pleased, frankly, to have my own free

will left! What with all this lot being possessed and everything. You've given

them no choice, have you, about giving up their physical forms for you? You're

simply taking their life essences from them, to propel you into the outer

dimensions. They haven't been given any choice in the matter at all!'

Goomba leaned forward slightly. You could tell he was absolutely livid.

'What manner of creature are you, to defy me thus? I am Goomba!'

'We know who you are! You've left us in no doubt, after all that shouting. I'm

just pointing out that what you're doing here isn't actually very fair...' The

Doctor grabbed hold of my arm, dragged me closer through the crowd of

acolytes and whispered sharply, 'You've got to climb up there. Up his back. It's

the only way. I'll keep him occupied.'

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. ' *What?* I can't climb! Especially not up a

thing like that.. It's on *fire*!'

‘It hasn’t all caught light yet,’ the Doctor hissed. ‘You’ll find a way up there.

You must! You’ve got to grab your dad and get him out of there. I’ve just

realised.. we can do this! We can save them all! Prevent Goomba from burning

out all their minds when he vanishes from this dimension. If you get up there,

drag your dad out of the effigy’s head, and get him away in time... Goomba will

just be burned up. No transference and no transfiguration. Just ashes!’ He

grinned at me. Even there, in the middle of that hideous nightmare, he grinned at

me: delighted with the simplicity of his plan. ‘Go on, then!’ he urged. ‘You have

to do it now! I’ll keep Goomba chatting.’

‘I.. ’ I said. ‘I…’

‘What is it?’ the Doctor frowned.

‘I can’t climb. I mean... I can’t save his life. I can’t do it.’

‘Why not?’ he snapped.

‘I can’t do anything, that’s why. I’m useless! I’ll mess it up!’ I must admit, of

all the times to have a crisis of confidence, this wasn’t one of the better moments.

‘Rubbish,’ the Doctor cried. ‘You push yourself through this crowd, get

yourself up there and do the business. Now, go!’

We could hardly hear each other above all the ecstatic moaning and chanting

and the crackling of the flames. But something in the Doctor's words had pushed

me on. As I hunched my shoulders and pushed through the crowd, shifting them

aside, buffeted back here and there by their eagerness and the force of the heat, I

realised what it was that had spurred me on so effectively. The Doctor had faith

in me. He hadn't even had to say so. He just knew I could do this.

I slipped out of the crowd, along the shadey side of the garden, and down the

very back, where the compost heap was. It was quieter here and, when I looked,

the Doctor was right.

The flames hadn't quite reached the back of the effigy. They were

concentrated at the front, on the heap of branches and wood at Goomba's feet.

Suddenly I could see a way to climb up the back of the creature. There were

footholds and handholds everywhere. If only he stayed still, and didn't notice

that I was clinging on for dear life. . I braced myself and ran forward...

'What do I care,' Goomba was bellowing at the Doctor, 'for the lives of

human beings? What are they to me? Merely fuel.'

'They'll hear you, Goomba! I'm sure they won't be very pleased to hear that.'

'Their minds are gone,' he shouted. 'While I live, their minds are useless.

They have no thoughts of their own.'

‘Except for the one in your wooden skull, eh, Goomba?’ cried the Doctor.

‘Except for him. He still hangs on to some of his intelligence, doesn’t he? Because

he provides the vital spark, doesn’t he? He’s the flint that strikes up the spark to

propel you across the multiverse. Without him, you’re lost, aren’t you?’

I was yanking myself up the twisting branches that formed the wooden god’s

calves, then the thick planks that his thighs were made out of. This exchange of

his and the Doctor’s was booming out all around me.

‘That is true,’ Goomba admitted. ‘The human being here inside me was the

first human Goomba made proper contact with. He is vital indeed.’

‘Oh, yes,’ called the Doctor mockingly. ‘That was back in the days when you

were just a set of garden furniture, wasn’t it? How galling that must have been

for you! How riled you must have been! The great god Goomba, reduced to

garden furniture! You were even reduced in a sale because no one really wanted

you!’

‘Silence!’ the creature roared. He twisted about and I was almost flung off,

into the trees. I was aching and sweating like mad now; red hot from the

exertion, but also the creeping flames. I was far away enough from them not to

be in danger just yet, but their heat was intense. ‘You may not speak to me like

that!’ Goomba screamed. ‘Seize him, my servants!’

I could see, through gaps in the hollow creature’s body, that the Doctor was

being manhandled and dragged to the ground. I could see my own mother in

that savage melee, tackling him down on the lawn.

‘You won’t win, Goomba!’ the Doctor bellowed, still undeterred. ‘Creatures

like you never do...’

I was hoping Goomba wouldn’t suddenly become aware of my presence, as I

scaled up his neck, hand over hand. Then, suddenly, I was at his head, which

was a sort of cage, all latticed and woven from sticks and branches. It was all

quite ingenious, the way his acolytes had built him. It was a shame he was evil,

really.

But there was no time to dwell on the aesthetics of the bamboo god. I had to

rattle on the wooden bars of the cage, I had to squeeze open a gap and I had to

get my dad’s attention before it was much too late. ‘Dad!’ I hissed. Would

Goomba hear me? Where were his ears? What would he do when he realised I

was there?

Dad was slumped by one of the glowing eye cavities. He looked just about

dead with heat exhaustion and madness.

‘Dad! It’s me! I’ve come to get you out of here!’

He jerked awake at the sound of my voice. What.. ?’

Below, the noise was even more fierce. It sounded as if that crowd was baying

for the Doctor’s blood. They wanted to rip him to shreds for blaspheming against

Goomba.

‘Do not destroy him!’ Goomba shouted. ‘We will take his essence too.

Nothing must be wasted. Not a single drop...’ The voice echoed horribly inside

that wooden skull. I was half inside now, dragging myself between the jagged

woven branches.

‘Get yourself away, Peter,’ said Dad. He waved at me feebly. ‘He’s going to

murder us all. There’s nothing I can do to stop him. You must get yourself

away. .’

Dad’s face was contorting as he forced these words out. He was struggling

desperately to retain control of his own mind: just enough to warn me to flee.

‘I won’t leave you,’ I shouted. ‘You’re coming down from here with me.’ I

reached out my hands to him.

‘The flames!’ he shouted. ‘They’re higher than ever. We’ll never make it

down. .’ This was so much like a movie I couldn’t believe it. Everything was

coming to a climax all together, and at the very last moment. The only thing

missing was the touching moment of understanding and reconciliation.

Dad looked at me. ‘You’re. . you’re going to save me?’ He staggered to his

feet, choking on the thick fumes that were issuing up through the gaps in the

struts of wood. ‘You, Peter? You’ve come to save me? I didn’t think you’d ever

do that. I thought you didn’t think much of me. .’

I grabbed hold of his skinny old arms and dragged him through the middle

of the skull, which had started to rock now. Goomba had realised that something

was going on. Those fearsome red orbs of his eyes were flashing horribly. ‘Of

course I’m here to save you, you silly old fool!’ I helped him haul himself

through the gap in the wood. I hung on and supported him while he yanked

himself free. ‘Why did you do it, Dad?’ I asked him. I couldn’t help myself asking

it. ‘Why did you give yourself up to this creature?’

‘I was redundant,’ he said. ‘There was nothing left for me. Nothing

here. My

work was finished. You and your mother didn't need me... didn't love me... not

any more...' Together we were climbing backwards down the body of Goomba.

'This creature needed me. He came to me and explained just how much he

needed me. I was flattered, I suppose...'

I couldn't believe it. He thought Mum and I didn't love him any more? He

was depressed, so he gave his mind over to an evil god from the dawn of time?

We jumped the last few yards, on to the churned up lawn. We were coughing

our guts out. Dad was okay though. I helped him to his feet and held him in a

bear hug. 'Retirement really doesn't suit you after all, does it?' I said.

He didn't hear me. There was an almighty racket from the acolytes. They

didn't sound very happy at all.

'Goomba!' the Doctor shouted out challengingly. 'Talk to us! Speak to us!

Why have you gone quiet?'

'The effigy is dead,' my dad said. 'Goomba is no more.' I stared in horror, as

his eyes flashed that terrible red. He pushed me aside and stalked round the now

blazing pyre, and he silenced his servants by holding up both hands.

'Goomba!' he cried. 'Goomba is gone!'

And then Dad collapsed on to the ruined lawn.

Mum, the Doctor and all the others came running. Dad was lying too close to

the flames. His clothes were smouldering and scorching and, together, we only

just managed to drag him away in time.

The servants of Goomba suddenly stopped in their tracks. It was like all of

them remembered something very important, all at the same time. They jerked

awake and stared about themselves.

Mum, the Doctor and I clustered about Dad. ‘Give him air,’ the Doctor said.

‘Step back.’ He clapped me quickly on the shoulder. ‘And well done, by the way.

You’ve saved us all, you know.’

I didn’t get a chance to bask in that moment. We all watched as a weird, will-

o’- the-wisp thing came whooshing out of Dad’s unconscious body. It was like

smoke, pouring out of him. It joined the smoke from the pyre, plunging upwards

into the summer afternoon sky.

Now the wooden effigy was properly taken hold of by the flames. It crackled

and shivered and blazed away. Within an hour it had burned away to almost

nothing.

By then, all of its acolytes found themselves returned to consciousness,

pleased to be their own selves again and still alive. And we had called

ambulances, and were left with the prospect of how to explain all this chaos to

the authorities.

A bonfire out of control. Barbecue guests with smoke inhalation. A father and

son hospitalised through their own silliness, in building a bonfire in the shape of

a voodoo god. It had been too big for their suburban garden and very nearly

caused a disaster.

That was how it was all reported. In the local press and on the news.

Dad and I had been kept in for observation for a couple of days. They had put

us in the same ward. When the news came on, we were laughed at and ironically

applauded by the other men in there. It was mortifying.

Then I was forced to watch hour after hour of gardening shows and house

make-over shows on the TV.

Dad and I didn't talk about Goomba. I think it was for the sake of our sanity

that we pretended the local news got it right. Father and son got carried away

building a summer bonfire. Barbecue madness in south Manchester.

At visiting hour that evening, in came Mum, dolled up to the nines, and the

Doctor, swishing about in his velvet coat. He brought us some sweets

and a

strange-looking cactus. ‘It’s alien,’ he confided, ‘but it isn’t nasty, if you see what

I mean. It won’t take you over. I don’t think so, anyway. Though that does

remind me of a funny story.’

‘We won’t stay long,’ Mum said. ‘I know you two have a lot to talk about.

Father-and-son things. You don’t get enough time like this to talk together

usually. We’ll leave you to it.’

‘What?’ Dad struggled to sit up, fighting with the stiff white sheets and

blankets. ‘Where are you going?’

‘Shopping,’ Mum grinned, shouldering her bag. ‘I mentioned the Trafford

Centre — I haven’t been out for days — not since this horrible business began.

But the Doctor’s made me a better offer.’

‘A better offer?’ I asked, warily.

‘He says he knows some smashing shops,’ she said eagerly. ‘Places he’s sure

I’ve never even heard of.’

The Doctor was grinning too. ‘That’s what your mum needs, while you two

get yourselves healthy again. A little light shopping. A nice meal somewhere. A

run out.’

‘She does know, doesn’t she,’ I said, ‘that you’re talking about, like, time and

space?'

The Doctor shrugged. 'I think so. Does it matter? I doubt anything would

shock your mother.' He ruffled my hair, which I hate.

'Are we ready, Doctor?' Mum asked, giving Dad a peck on the cheek.

They went, leaving Dad and I in companionable silence.

'I hope your mother doesn't buy anything silly,' said Dad.

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The Three Paths

Ian Potter

An Adventure of the First Doctor

The locals themselves have many names for the mountain, almost seeming to choose which they use on whim — often referring to it as Ouacqsmal, the Capricious, Balmec, the Vine Bearer or Bispouin, the Sun Blocker, in consecutive sentences. To confuse the unwary further it seems the mountain can be masculine, feminine or neuter at will, much like the antic witch dancers of pre-protectorate legend, so extreme care must be taken when seeking directions in the old town.

However, whilst this Protean Animism may occasionally 'wrong-foot' the uninitiated traveller, the experienced ethnographer soon detects subtleties of context which dictate the nomenclature and gender to be adopted in most cases, and, although it is by no means essential for everyday intercourse, an

awareness of the natives' lingering attachment to such quondam notions can aid the serious student materially in interpretation of the more impenetrable indigenous poetry, art and jokes. Indeed, the natives' curious cosmology might almost be said to excuse some of their more barbarous pre-colonial customs.

From *Under the Shadow of Mount Delacroix,*

Airey and Haldeman's New World Gazetteer

(second revised edition)

The black-and-white figure the youth assumed was his father lurched forward, pulling himself from the hungry grey soil. Its button eyes were mismatched and cracked, and yellow bones protruded from its threadbare coloured waistcoat. Its piebald fur mouth lolled open as it staggered towards the water's edge.

'It's not safe here,' it said somehow, through a throat more missing than present. 'Not safe.'

It placed a golden-petalled garland like its own around the young man's neck, its badger-bristle pelt brushing against his skin. It was cold.

'You'll need this,' the figure insisted, its voice a wheezing TARDIS rasp, as it arranged the wreath on his shoulders like a fussy house servant preparing him for visitors. 'And one of these too.'

As the young man watched, the creature tore off its left hand matter-of-factly

and held it out to him, still wriggling. Soft-toy stuffing fell from the wound, and

where it hit the dry earth beneath them, pale plant life stirred.

‘It’s for the boat trip,’ the father thing gasped as brittle twigs began to attack it

from below. ‘An oar for you to stick in.’ Its slipped-stitch mouth seemed to smile

somehow.

The young man took the severed hand without question and clambered on

board the small blue boat behind him. His ‘father’ didn’t follow.

‘Aren’t you coming with me?’ he asked. The soft-toy corpse didn’t answer,

just launched the battered wooden dinghy into the black water.

The young man held out the creature’s own hand to it, to help it aboard, but

it merely pushed its old owner away. The creature fell to the ground, panting,

sickly yellow grasses wrapping themselves around its ragged felt-and-bone feet.

‘I’ll meet you on the other side of the river,’ the creature called as the garland

about its neck began to twitch and tighten in sympathy with the plants below.

‘What river?’ the young man whispered back. The darkness his old craft was

sliding into seemed to be a lake, or a sea even, and there was no far shore in

sight. ‘Which side?’

The half-man answered faintly as it was pulled underground. ‘I forget,’ it

called hoarsely in a voice like the wind. ‘Everyone does in time.’

The young man knew he’d never see his father again and yet he could not

weep. It was if the dust of that receding shore had clogged his eyes somehow. He

pressed on into the darkness in his leaky boat, steering a path into the unknown

with his writhing hand oar, and, as he travelled on, cold inky water began to fill

his craft, seeping in through the cracks in its old wooden hull and pooling

around his ankles.

Slowly, the icy black water engulfed the young man, and he woke into

whiteness and old age, without ever finding land.

The antique clock in the corner chimed two as the Doctor opened his eyes, as

if to say that even here, in this timeless place, it was the middle of the night. The

ship’s control room was in semi-darkness, the column at its centre still. The

melodious background hum suggesting the TARDIS had come to rest again.

The Doctor shivered, trying to shake away the last of his nightmare, and rose

unsteadily from the chair he’d slept in, his bones complaining as he

stood. The

chair's magnetic field had done nothing to ease his pain. If anything, he felt

stiffer and more fatigued now than he had before. As he straightened up,

rubbing his hands to get the blood circulating, the stuffed toy he'd unwittingly

held in his sleep fell to the floor.

'Sorry.. Hi-fl,' he mumbled, the toy's name taking a moment to come to him

as so many names seemed to these days, and gingerly bent to pick it up. This

little toy panda had meant a lot to a friend of his once, standing in for the whole

world when he'd been utterly alone. It seemed wrong it was still with the Doctor

now that friend had gone. 'And sorry, Steven, too,' he added softly as he

replaced the panda on its throne and thought about its owner, now guiding the

people of some alien realm without this last reminder of his home by his side.

Even this panda had left him once of course. The Doctor remembered clearly the

look of joy on little Bobby Zierath's face as Steven had handed it to him, and the

bitterness with which the adult Robert had returned it too soon after.

The Doctor sighed, his breath misting in the air. 'Brave, brave boy,' he said to

himself through chattering teeth, thinking of both Steven and Bobby in turn, then

stopped.

Why was he so cold?

He walked slowly over to his old store chest to find the fingerless woolen

mittens he often wore when not feeling quite himself, and leant forward to

retrieve them. As he did so, he caught sight of his reflection in something

metallic within. The face gazing back looked curiously distorted in the half-light,

pale and bloodless and somewhat fearful too. The Doctor hardly recognised it.

He crouched down to examine the ghostly face more closely and as he did, it

vanished, his breath steaming the dagger's blade that had held it.

'Of course!' he chuckled, watching a fresh plume of water vapour condense

with his words, his fingers dancing up to his mouth as if to grab them from the

air. 'Steam!' It was no wonder his joints ached so — the ship's temperature must

be close to freezing.

He scuttled to his workbench to examine his instruments, impatiently

brushing aside entomology textbooks, jinning pliers and microscopes until he

found the device he was after — an old brass Fitzroy barometer with more

mercury in it than he'd ever have admitted to anyone. Thirty degrees

Fahrenheit,

its thermometer confirmed, and the crystals in its storm glass presaged snow.

‘Local atmospherics or fault, though?’ he pondered aloud, drumming at his

lips in thought. ‘That’s the question.’ He skittered over to the central console,

seeking confirmation of his readings, his blue-stoned ring feeling heavy on his

hand as he tapped and twisted the controls with rheumatic fingers. The heating

controls seemed to be functioning normally, but it was difficult to feel confident

about any of the ship’s readings now the fault locator was broken. The fault

locator of course claimed it was working perfectly, which made repairs to it

almost impossible.

The Doctor switched on the external scanner, and a glance at the flickering

monochrome image on the screen explained for the cold in an instant. It was

night outside the ship too, and there was little in the view to recommend it. Fizzy

grey snow lashed a fizzy grey mountainside under a dark heavy sky.

The ship’s multidimensional interior was acclimatising to its surroundings

again. It was presumably meant to be a boon; preventing travellers getting

decompression sickness or suffering a sudden embolism in the move from one

environment to another, but all it ever seemed to have done for the Doctor was

give him damp interior walls and prevent the occasional draft when he opened

the doors.

‘You know, I really must uncover the code sequence to stop this.’ He tutted to

himself, rapping the glass of an instrument dial. One of these days the ship was

bound to end up somewhere inimical to life, and it would be prudent to be able

to find that out without boiling or freezing to death on arrival. He scribbled a

little reminder to this effect in his notebook, and, after a minute or two trying to

decipher his notes on the ship’s thermostatic control systems, put on his white

silk scarf and his lambskin hat for warmth. He sat back down in his magnetic

chair and tried to rest again, but all inactivity did was remind him of his joint

pains and how cold he was, so after a few uncomfortable minutes he decided to

take a stroll instead.

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The Doctor briefly considered inviting his latest travelling companions to join

him on his excursion, as he fumbled with the clasp of his outdoors cloak, but

quickly decided against it. Ben and Polly were unwilling explorers at

the best of

times and unlikely to be much cheerier for being woken at three in the morning,

ship time, for a walk in the snow. Let them sleep through, he decided. The cold

clearly hadn't reached the depths of the TAMS they slept in yet and they'd only

want breakfast at four and their beds by tea-time if he woke them now. Besides,

ever since they'd left Cornwall, it seemed that everywhere he and his new

friends had arrived had been icy and unwelcoming, and he felt sure they'd

berate him for yet another arctic landing spot.

He lit an old oil lamp with a Maxwell's Demon Lucifer, opened up the doors

and stepped out to face another mountain, another howling wind, and, with

luck, another little mystery he could fill his head with.

The view beyond the doors jolted the Doctor from his introspection.

The night sky, merely dark on the scanner, was a honey-deep amber, and a

familiar moon hung overhead in it. Beatitudes swarmed around his oil lamp,

heavy with evening nectar, pot-bellies helium-full. He knew at once where he

was.

He'd stood on this mountain before, smelt the weanskrike and tristort on the

sharp wind, chased tafelshrews through its snows. At the Academy,

they'd

called this place Cadon; in the family home, Lung; in the legends of unhappened

days it was called something else again. Far below, to the north, he could see the

Capitol lights. He was home.

Had they finally reeled him in then, he wondered. Was it 'Come in, number

one, your time's up' so soon?

'No,' he shouted angrily to the wind. 'It can't be! I refuse to believe it.'

His cry echoed in the air for a second, startling a foraging cobblemouse

nearby into taking flight with a high-pitched squeal. Somewhere, a little way off,

an owl hooted derisively in reply.

'What do you have to say to that then, eh, gentlemen?' the Doctor added after

a moment, looking about himself slowly. No fluffier response came, and, after a

moment or two more, he began to laugh. 'Quite so! Quite so! Nothing! No, if

you'd recaptured me,' he reasoned, addressing an invisible tribunal with a raised

finger, 'then there'd be dressing up to be done, wouldn't there? Representatives

of the Houses on parade, all collars and lipstick, yes? Age-old binding rituals to

intone and all manner of forms and folderol for the record?'

Still no booming disembodied voice echoed forth to contradict him.

‘At the very least I’d expect Agency men here surely, play-acting at divinity.’

He waved his lamp in an arc about him triumphantly, no grandly robed figures

appeared from the shadows. ‘Yet not a peep from any of you. Ergo, no one here

to peep!’ He chuckled to himself again.

‘So, who *has* brought me here, then?’ he demanded of the darkness. His

people’s taste for grand theatrics surely meant they would have made more of

his return than this. This was the work of someone with a far sparer sense of

drama.

The Doctor felt his eyes drawn to the mountain’s summit. Some way above

him, at the three-named mountain’s peak, just visible through the falling snow,

was a small tree, its leaves glinting dimly in the moonlight. It was a tree the

Doctor knew of old, and he knew the answer to his question lay there.

Apprehensively, the Doctor began his ascent; retracing the spiralling path

he’d last followed half a lifetime ago. The wind scoured his face, and grey snow

clung to his eyelashes as he half walked, half climbed to the mountain top

through the darkness, almost blinded and deafened by the snowstorm, feeling

his way towards the summit. Unbidden, century-old memories swam to the

surface of his mind.

‘What’s this mountain’s true name, sir?’ he heard his younger self ask his

mentor, his child’s voice booming in the firm and masculine tones of a thirty-

year- old. ‘My cousins call it Lung, and Old Lady Nine Teeth calls it Plutarch in

her stories, but at the Academy they call it Cadon and laugh when I use the other

names. Which is it truely, sir?’

‘Ah, that is a question for the mountain, not me,’ his mentor replied, in his

curious sing-song voice. ‘But know this: whatever you call it will change the way

it is climbed.’

The way the Doctor was climbing it now, by moon and lamplight through

blizzard and biting wind, the mountain was undoubtedly Plutarch — the place

of dark tales from the untimes before that Lady Nine Teeth had told him so often

in his youth. The shadows held menace, the ground fought his feet, and the wind

seemed to scream curses in forgotten tongues. It was a place of ghosts and

vampires again tonight. Terrors the history books denied seemed indisputable

and awful truths as the Doctor struggled on through the darkness.

Shortly before dawn, the Doctor reached the mountain's summit and the bare

twisted tree that grew there. By some quirk of meteorology, the storm seemed

calmer here, and the Doctor was able to clear the frost from his eyes with his

scarf. Under the tree, in a knot of wild sarlains, sat an elderly man, as old and

gnarled as the tree itself, his grey hempen robe lightly crusted with snow. Like

the sarlains he sat among he was battered by the wind but unmoving. It was the

Doctor's old mentor, the one-eyed hermit he had visited here as a child,

munching quietly on a silver apple just as he had a hundred years before. The

hermit didn't look up at the Doctor's arrival. He had an apple to finish. The

Doctor waited, catching his breath and regarding his guru suspiciously. His fuse-

wire hair and papery skin were unchanged by the years, yet to the Doctor's older

eyes, he now seemed much less ancient than he had before.

'You're back, then,' the hermit said eventually, carefully planting his apple

core in the ground before him.

'Yes, yes, so it appears,' the Doctor replied, brushing a patch of snow from the

ground with his cloak, and seating himself on it. 'It's.. fortuitous that our returns

should coincide so neatly, is it not, sir?' he said, lowering himself

stiffly into the

familiar cross-legged position he'd once found so easy and removed his scarf.

'Isn't it just, my child?' The hermit smiled back, holding his pupil's gaze with

his single good eye. 'Thanks for the khata,' he added, and picked up the

discarded scarf.

'I've been pulled back, then, I presume?' the Doctor asked.

His mentor seemed to think for a second. 'Maybe,' he said gently, 'but don't

worry, not by them.' He gestured vaguely to the north and the glinting Capitol

lights, shimmering like stars through the snow, then draped his new scarf

around his neck. 'Bit soggy,' he said.

'Did you bring me back, then, sir?' whispered the Doctor, leaning forward

conspiratorially; in awe of the power such a task must have taken.

The hermit giggled. 'Oh, you did that yourself, I think,' he said dismissively.

'Subconscious mind and all that. I really haven't the "you know" for that kind of

caper. Part of you wanted to be back here, I suspect, and "Hey, presto!" I just

happen to have followed.' He tapped his nose. 'I've been keeping an eye out for

you, you see,' he added and winked. Despite himself, the Doctor found

his gaze

drawn to the empty eye socket that remained open.

‘But there are laws, barriers —’ he protested.

‘Unless, of course, laws and barriers can be breeched?’ the old man suggested

wryly.

The Doctor toyed absently with his ring, remembering its part in his escape so

long ago.

‘But I thought return was impossible,’ he said.

‘Oh, yes, probably so, as impossible goes, absolutely,’ the hermit said airily,

picking at his teeth for bits of apple. ‘Play havoc with the fillings, these metal

fruit, you know. Yet here you are.’ He smiled and leant forward. ‘This is, I

believe, the same night you left here, and that shouldn’t have been possible really

either. I think you may have returned through the same loophole in the laws you

slipped out through.’

The Doctor was dumbfounded. Could it be that down in the jewelled city far

below them, he was slipping away even now?

‘You do make rather a habit of rule-bending, after all,’ the hermit continued,

spitting a piece of foiled apple peel into his scarf. ‘Would you like tea, child?’

‘Most kind, most kind,’ the Doctor found himself saying, his mind

elsewhere.

The hermit waggled his fingers and a bone-china tea service appeared before

them in the snow, brazenly challenging the laws of physics to stop it and the

rules of aesthetics to find it incongruous. ‘I’ll be mother,’ he said, and poured tea

for them both.

The Doctor took a sip. The tea in his cup was dark and stewed and not quite

to his tastes, but it was at least warm. The hermit lifted his cup in response. ‘Your

health,’ he said. ‘Transmigrate the yak’s butter, would you?’

The Doctor couldn’t see any.

‘Feel free to do it with your hands in your pockets if need be,’ his mentor

went on. ‘I seem to recall you always found it easier that way.’

Trying hard not to think about it, the Doctor put his hand under his coat and

on the third attempt produced a rather ugly silver cow-shaped cream jug from

within and passed it to his companion. ‘Sorry about the serving vessel, sir,’ he

explained, ‘a little stiff in the wrist these days. Rheumatism. I’m using a magnetic

flux device to ease it, but...’

The hermit nodded sympathetically. The solidified yak’s milk in the jug was

too thick to pour from the cow’s mouth, so he spooned some from the opening

on the cow's back and dropped it in his cup.

'I know just how it is. Have you tried copper bangles at all?' he said, stirring

two lumps of milk into his brew. 'A chap I know in Cambridge swears by them.'

'Really?' said the Doctor.

'Oh, yes, frequently. Do you have any copper with you, at all?'

'Not to speak of, sir,' the Doctor faltered in reply. 'Just a couple of Bronze Age

Greek obols, and a daguerreotype,' he added haltingly, indicating his breast

pocket. 'My granddaughter.'

'Oh, can I see?' asked the hermit, rubbing his hands.

The Doctor pulled the picture from his jacket. It was a sheet of silver-coated

copper in a little leather carriage case. The image of the girl on it was just a film

of tarnished metal that could have been wiped away with a finger if it hadn't

been covered by glass. She looked very serious, which was hardly surprising

when one considered how long she'd had to stand stock-still for the photograph

to be taken.

The hermit tilted the picture in his hands to see it clearly. 'Takes after her

mother,' he said disinterestedly. 'Can I see the obols too?'

The Doctor produced them from his waistcoat. The coins were battered and

green with age, Agamemnon's head and the Mycenaean lion almost

undiscernible on them. The hermit didn't seem impressed.

'Ah, you'll want to hang on to most of that, then,' he said dismissively,

handing back the coins and picture and rather showily magicking a plate of

biscuits from the air. 'Probably not enough there, anyway.'

The Doctor sipped his thick salty tea in silence.

'Why have I returned, sir?' he asked eventually.

The hermit shrugged. 'Who knows, my boy? Perhaps you never fully left.

You flew far, of course, but I suspect your homeland's soil remained on your

shoes throughout, somehow.'

'But I made myself an exile!' the Doctor spluttered.

'Indeed, and how better to keep your home in your heart?' his teacher

replied. 'Arrowroot?'

The Doctor declined the proffered side plate. 'I let go of my last link with this

world long ago, sir!' he protested, remembering the moment he'd closed the door

on the girl in the photograph, forcing her to walk her own path at last. 'I cut

myself off entirely.'

The hermit looked up from the biscuit plate, suddenly holding the Doctor

with his sole misty blue eye. 'Yes. But did you let yourself go, Theta?'

he said

simply. ‘My name is not Theta,’ the Doctor rejoined sharply.

‘Oh, Snail, Theta, whatever,’ the hermit continued. ‘It doesn’t matter, child.

What matters is that there comes a time when we all have to stop being who we

were, let what we’ve become come undone, and I think that time is coming for

you. It’s time for you to let your old self go, to die or be reborn.’

The Doctor suddenly felt as if he was thirty again, terrified by tales of undead

and unborn gods, and the monsters that ate you from within.

‘I’m scared to, though,’ he confessed. ‘Everything I’ve become, everything

I’ve learned, all the wonders I’ve seen — I don’t want to lose them, sir. I don’t

want to stop being the me you helped create, sir.’

The hermit sighed, as if disappointed. ‘Then walk down the mountain, Snail,’

he said earnestly, ‘return to your shell. The Capitol awaits. Your younger self has

only just slipped away, they’ve probably no idea you ever left. You could

probably live forever back there, if you were careful and tried hard.’ He bit into a

Bath Oliver and swept a dew-drop from his nose. ‘It would feel like an eternity,

of course, but you’d have your books, your studies, your games. You

could train

roses and prune bushes, nurture a garden, and pretend it was the cosmos you

were weeding. You could perhaps even transmigrate yourself some copper

bangles with a little practice and patience.'

The Doctor considered his choices. Death, change, or a return to the world

he'd left. It might be fitting to end his travels and his days here, back among his

own people, sharing the wisdom his travels had brought, and that, no doubt, was

why the ship, or perhaps he, himself, had brought him back. But then being

fitting had never really been his strong point.

'Did I ever tell you the story of the Penultimate Evil?' the hermit asked. The

Doctor shook his head.

'Thought not, it's one of Lady Nine Teeth's really. It's a good one though, and

quite low on undead, for her.'

The hermit took a sip of tea and began to recite his tale.

'In the unhappened days that went before,' he said, 'before they went and

never happened of course, there was a child, and his people were at war against

the greatest evil imaginable, an evil that they called the Penultimate Evil, because

they knew the limits of their imagination.'

The Doctor smiled.

‘History had taught them there’s not enough space to write down all of time

in, and certainly not enough time,’ the hermit went on, ‘and just when you think

you’ve seen it all there’s always something worse, so penultimate the evil

remained.

‘Now, this child, like many a child, loved tales of war and heroism, and the

tales he loved the best were tales of the war against the Penultimate Evil. He

knew all the heroes’ names and the weaknesses of all their enemies, and, like

many a child seduced by nonsense tales, he wanted to be a hero himself when he

grew up and to fight in the people’s war. So, all his young life he trained to be a

warrior, learning to defeat minor evils first — slowly working his way through

the league tables of cosmic villainy, from Quarks to Piscatarians to wristcom

hailing-tone designers and beyond, discovering their weaknesses and

vanquishing them, one by one, until one day he had bested them all and he

became a man. Not much of a man, perhaps, but a great general and a good

soldier to boot.

‘And on the very day he took command of his silver-prowed ship ready to

face the enemy, the war ended anti-climactically in one of those freak ontological

accidents that always seemed to be happening back then. No one knew how or

why, and now those days haven't happened any more we can't even be sure if,

but happen it did as much we can say any unhappening happened back then in

never. The Penultimate Evil was annihilated with nary a heroic self-sacrifice

performed. To be honest, I think it was this kind of thing going on so much that

made the unhappened days unhappen completely in the end, but what do I

know, I exist. I was probably never there.

'Anyhow, poof, enemy gone. The young man didn't know what to do; the

reason for his whole existence had evaporated overnight. He had already

vanquished all the universe's less significant evils in his training — there was no

one left to fight. In his distress, he sought advice from the wise old lady his

people called the Crone, seeking her out in her cave in the southern mountains.

What should I do, oh, Crone? he cried, somewhat tactlessly revealing the

name his people gave the poor thing. "What should I do?" He said it three times

but you get the idea.'

The hermit paused in his tale and sighed, just as he always used to all those

years before, and, because he knew it was expected, the Doctor prompted him to

continue.

'And what did the Crone do, sir?' he whispered.

The hermit smiled. 'She gave him a sword to slay the Ultimate Evil with,' he

said, then yawned and scratched his nose.

The Doctor waved his hand dismissively. "Be careful if you fight

Nietzscheans lest you become a Nietzchean yourself', is it?'

'Perhaps,' the hermit said. 'I always thought it was a koan about how hard it

is to draw up league tables.' They sat for a while and looked at each other in

silence. 'Do you have a sword for me?' the Doctor asked suddenly.

'No, but I do have a gift if you'll accept it,' the hermit said gently, pulling

something from his sleeve and proffering it to the Doctor. 'Something to give you

new heart, perhaps.'

The Doctor took it. It was his old page-a-year diary, left here so long ago; a

small black leather volume with gold embossed letters on the front, about 500

pages thick and filled with dimensionally transcendental scrawl. He opened a

page at random to find his younger self reflecting happily on a

summer's day

skimmer ride with his best friend, drawing a monster he called Torvic in the

margins and looking forward to a week of infinite-regression calculus in the

autumn. The young man in the entry seemed a stranger to him now, the days

related, familiar yet distant, like a half-forgotten childhood fiction. It wasn't who

he was any more. This was where his old self lived now, he realised, as words on

a page, nowhere else. The person who'd called this world home, and had fled it

all those years ago, promising himself he'd return one day — who was probably

fleeing it even now — could never go home again, because he no longer existed.

Suddenly the Doctor felt elated. There was nothing to fear. He'd changed

already. Everyone he'd ever met, everyone he'd held dear and let go had

changed him without him realising, this coming change, the final letting go,

would be no different.

'Thank you for showing me the right path again, sir,' the Doctor said

eventually. 'I've done no such thing, Doctor,' the hermit answered carefully. 'I've

merely given you a small push on a mountain top. The way you roll down now

is up to you.'

They laughed together longer than the joke deserved, and at dawn they

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parted.

As he made his slow, halting descent, the Doctor looked down at his old

homes in the cold early light — the family house nestling atop a nearby

promontory, rococo and wild, the Academy, brooding in stark shadow below it,

and, at the mountain's foot, the crystal-domed Capitol, clean and glistening in

the dawn. He had a lot of history in those homes down there — too much,

probably. He blew a kiss to the past which froze on his lips, and, hugging himself

against the cold, headed down to the box that held his future.

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About the Authors

JOHN BINNS edited the *Doctor Who* fiction collection *Silver Carrier*, in which

many of today's *Doctor Who* novelists and television script writers sharpened

their teeth. For Big Finish, he has edited four *Short Trips* anthologies — *A*

Universe of Terrors, Steel Skies, Life Science and *2040*. *Black and White* is his sixth

short story for the range.

ANDY CAMPBELL teaches A-level psychology in a college in Merseyside. He

has been a fan of *Doctor Who* since the early seventies, when Jon Pertwee's

exploits as the Doctor were more than enough to hook him on the series for life.

In the interest of balance he also enjoys horror films, eighties music, the books

and essays of George Orwell, and the short fiction of M. R. James, Stephen King

and Ramsey Campbell. *Separation Day* is his fifth story for the *Short Trips* series.

He seems to be making a habit of writing in the first person as a young, super-

intelligent woman, but is unsure why. He is currently working on a non- *Doctor*

Who novel.

ANDREW COLLINS (not to be confused with the journalist and broadcaster of

the same name) is the real name of Andy Coleman, a British actor/ writer

currently working in Los Angeles. He plays Jarrett in CBS's *The Bold and the*

Beautiful. In the late nineties he variously wrote, produced, directed and

performed in the cult show *Newsrevue* in London and Edinburgh. For Big Finish,

he has written three previous short stories including *The Invertebrates of Doom* for

Zodiac, the first *Short Trips* collection. He has appeared in several *Doctor Who*

audio dramas, including *The Fires of Vulcan* and *The Church and the Crown*, as well

as *Earthsearch* and the *Gallifrey* series. In the latter, he was married to Leela.

JAKE ELLIOT is a graduate of the Creative Writing MA at the University of East

Anglia. He has previously had work published in the magazines *Flux* and *Spiked*,

and the anthology *Paper Scissors Stone*. His work has been broadcast on BBC

Radio 4 and he is currently working on a novel.

STEPHEN FEWELL is an actor and writer. He plays Jason Kane in Big Finish's

range of *Professor Bernice Summerfield* audio dramas, and has also appeared in

five *Doctor Who* plays. He has now written three short stories for the *Short Trips*

range, and has also contributed to the *Professor Bernice Summerfield* collections.

MATT KIMPTON won the Proteus New Voices Award with his first stage play,

Act of God, and followed it up with *The Talking Cure*, which won the Cambridge

Drama Festival and was later showcased by *Three Weeks* as some of the best new

writing on the Edinburgh Fringe. He has since written for *The Author, The*

Guardian and *The Independent*, and on TV was one of the winners of ITV's comedy

showcase *Shoot the Writers*. His current projects include a children's guide to

philosophy, as well as a sitcom about the end of the world.

JOSEPH LIDSTER has written extensively for Big Finish's series of *Doctor Who*

audio dramas, with his second play, *Master*, being described by *Doctor Who*

Magazine as 'the most moving *Doctor Who* story ever'. He's written five *Doctor*

Who plays as well as scripts for Big Finish's *Sapphire & Steel, Professor Bernice*

Summerfield, UNIT and *Tomorrow People* ranges. He's also written 11 short stories

and a novella for the same company. He is currently creating an online gaming

world for the BBC's *Doctor Who* spin-off websites.

STEVE LYONS has written twenty novels, 11 of which feature the Doctor and

his companions — including *The Witch Hunters, The Crooked World* and *The*

Stealers of Dreams. He is also responsible for numerous audio dramas, comic

strips and short stories. He has 'worked with' characters from the worlds of

television, comic books, toys and games, including the X-Men, Strontium Dog

and Sapphire and Steel. His recent work includes the novelisation of *Bryan Singer*

and Dean Devlin's The Triangle, and the detective adventures of Mrs Lucinda Batt

for *Crime Confidential* magazine.

PAUL MAGRS has written a number of novels and short stories. His most

recent book is *Exchange*, published by Simon and Schuster. He lectures in

Creative Writing at Manchester Metropolitan University.

IAN POTTER has written comedy for TV's *The 11 O'Clock Show* and radio's *Week*

Ending, and worked behind the scenes on a number of TV shows, perhaps most

notably Victor Lewis-Smith's *Ads Infinitum* for BBC2. He's also had a radio play

produced by the BBC and stage plays performed at the Contact Theatre,

Manchester, the Crucible Theatre, Sheffield, the Theatre in the Mill, Bradford,

and the West Yorkshire Playhouse, Leeds. He's a curator of television at the

National Museum of Photography, Film & Television, and an occasional

contributor to Radio 4's *Front Row*. This is his fifth short story.

JACQUELINE RAYNER (editor) has written a number of novels and audio

plays for *Doctor Who* and its various spin-offs. She has also been a project editor

for BBC Worldwide's range of *Doctor Who* fiction and put together three previous

Short Trips collections for Big Finish — *Zodiac, Companions* and *The Muses*. She

has written two novels to tie in with the new series of *Doctor Who* — *Winner Takes*

All, which came out in 2005, and *The Stone Rose*, due for publication in 2006.

STEVEN A. ROMAN made his professional writing debut in 1993 with the

release of *Lorelei*, a horror comic book series. Since then, he's written a variety of

projects, including the novels *X-Men: The Chaos Engine Trilogy* and *Final*

Destination: Dead Man's Hand; short stories for the anthologies *Untold Tales of*

Spider-Man, The Ultimate Hulk, and *If I Were an Evil Overlord*; and the graphic

novels *Lorelei: Building the Perfect Beast, Vol. 1, Sunn* and *Stan Lee's Alexa*. Among

his upcoming projects are the time-travel comic series *Time Passages* and the

graphic novel *Lorelei: Building the Perfect Beast, Vol. 2*.

DARREN SELLARS has now written two stories for the *Short Trips* range. His

previous contribution was *Never Seen Cairo* in 2004's *A Christmas Treasury*. He

lives in West Yorkshire.

STEWART SHEARGOLD is the writer of the audio dramas *Professor Bernice*

Summerfield and The Mirror Effect, Professor Bernice Summerfield in The Masquerade

of Death and *Gallifrey: Imperiatrix*. He has also written various short stories for Big

Finish. His forthcoming projects include a further *Professor Bernice Summerfield*

audio, *The Tartarus Gate, Gallifrey: Warfare* and a *Doctor Who* audio, *Red*. He lives

in Sydney and works in television.

GARETH WIGMORE is probably best known in *Doctor Who* circles as one of the

producers of Seventh Door's fanzines in the 19905. He has written several short

stories for Big Finish, has been a regular writer for the likes of *TV Zone* and *Film*

Review, and lives and works in London.

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